

TIMOTHY HERRING SERIES

HEAVY *as* LEAD



GLADYS
MITCHELL

writing as

MALCOLM TORRIE

HEAVY AS
LEAD

Titles by Gladys Mitchell

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Gladys Mitchell writing as Malcolm Torrie

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HEAVY AS LEAD

GLADYS MITCHELL WRITING
AS MALCOLM TORRIE

 THOMAS & MERCER

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Published by Thomas & Mercer, Seattle, 2014
www.apub.com

First published Great Britain in 1966 by Michael Joseph.
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E-ISBN: 9781477869376

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CHAPTER ONE

The Disqualified Driver

For some time now it has become the custom to identify certain groups, projects, and secret weapons by the initial letters of their official titles. One thinks of ENSA, PLUTO, NATO, NAAFI, P.A.Y.E., the WRNS, MI.5, the C.I.D., and a dozen others. Members of the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest were accustomed, guided thereto by their secretary, Timothy Herring, to refer to themselves and their organisation as PHISBE. To objections on the part of greybeard members Herring had replied,

“We need a telegraphic address, you see. No, I don’t think we’re likely to be confused with Thisbe. She, of course, also wears immortality as a garment in her own right, as we do, and needs no bush, laurel or otherwise, from us. On the other hand, *we* are of neuter gender, a something harumphrodite, as Kipling so tellingly puts it, whereas Thisbe, I am led to suppose, was a female, in spite of the fact (confidently reported by Shakespeare) that, like his three witches, she had a beard coming.”

“It sounds flippant,” he had been informed.

“Oh, no, I disagree,” he had rejoined. “The main body of the word *History* is there, and so are discreet references to the words *Preservation*, *Buildings*, and *Interest* and also to the fact that we are a *Society*.”

“Yes, but what does the final E stand for?”

“Without the final E the word would be unpronounceable.”

Timothy’s official title was that of secretary, but the more tiresome and unrewarding tasks attaching to this office were performed by a paid underling who distributed notices, typed agendas, answered the telephone, and sent out reminders to the committee to attend meetings. Timothy’s job (and he did it well) was to investigate the complaints of local history societies, lend an ear to their appeals for financial assistance, and look into their accounts of damage (wilful or otherwise) to buildings of historic value in their district. Having verified these things, he had to report upon them to his committee and, later, to the annual general meeting, so that Phisbe could decide whether or not to take action.

Upon Timothy’s findings the committee was accustomed to sit in sober and learned judgment. They debated the points he raised and argued long and earnestly, but, in the end, they were prepared to adopt his suggestions, for he had a *flair* for separating the wheat from the chaff, and rare indeed were the occasions on which the Society felt that it had wasted its money or had denied its aid to the deserving.

It was at one of these committee meetings that, under the heading on the agenda of *Correspondence*, Timothy said:

“There seems to be a complaint from a Mrs. Stretton who lives in a place called Parsons Purity. She says—it’s a very long letter and rather peevish, so do you want to hear the whole of it? If not, what it boils down to is that the lead has been stripped from the roof of the church and, as there are no funds to provide for an adequate replacement, the vicar and the

churchwardens have decided to use sheets of corrugated iron."

"As a temporary measure, of course," said a member.

"Well, I don't know. The lady sounds rather hysterical on the subject. It seems she thinks it's to be a permanent repair."

"Perhaps we had better hear the whole of the letter," said the chairman. Timothy read it aloud.

"She sounds knowledgeable, at any rate," commented the treasurer, "and, if she's right, it *doesn't* sound as though the corrugated iron is considered to be only a temporary measure. Oh, dear!"

"Do we know anything about the church at Parsons Purity?" asked the chairman, who was new to the office that year. Timothy went over to one of the filing cabinets which lined the spacious eighteenth-century room in which the committee meetings were always held, and abstracted a folder. He resumed his seat at the table.

"The church at Parsons Purity was visited by our member, the late R. G. H. Fellowby, in 1959," he said, "and his report on it is as follows: the building has rubble walls with local freestone dressings. The roof is lead-covered—"

"Ah!" interpolated a member.

"—and the church consists of nave, chancel, and crypt—"

"I like crypts, said a woman member.

"—and was built in about 1150. A north-east chapel, known as Dame Alice's Rest, was added in 1240 or thereabouts, and the chancel arch was widened somewhat earlier. Later, the north aisle and arcade were added, and a south porch was built late in the fifteenth century. The crypt is of the same date as the original chancel and has groined vaults springing

from columns which have moulded bases and scalloped capitals, one of which is carved. The carving shows, on the north side, a winged monster devouring a fish, on the east some conventional foliage, on the south a man fighting a beast, and on the west a grotesque head, probably that of a demon."

"Did Fellowby take any photographs?" asked a member.

"It doesn't seem so. I've no record that he did."

"Pity! Never mind. Go on."

"In the bay between windows on the south wall is a turret staircase leading up to the chancel but now partially blocked, and there is a similar stair on the north side which also originally led up to the chancel but which is now replaced by a flight of stone steps leading to the churchyard. There are three doorways in the west wall, two of them, now completely blocked, led by ramped passages up to the nave, and the middle one, still open, leads to a barrel-vaulted room, nine feet by eight feet, which may have been a confessional when the crypt was used as a chapel."

"It sounds a gem," said a member. "To hell with the corrugated iron! We must certainly do something about that."

"When was the roof leaded?" asked another.

"I don't know. Possibly in the fifteenth century, of course, but the church has been restored several times—three times during the nineteenth century, then in 1910, and lastly in 1932, when special attention was paid to the restoration of the crypt and to putting right the more flagrant errors of the nineteenth-century planners."

"That's all very well about the flagrant errors of the nineteenth-century planners," put in a querulous voice. "If it hadn't been for them, half our ancient monuments

wouldn't exist today. If they erred, they erred in the odour of sanctity . . ."

"Which has been known to stink," said an iconoclastic young member. "What I want to know," he continued hastily, "is what we're going to do about Parsons Purity."

"What we *can't* do is to let it be roofed with corrugated iron," said another member. "I move that Herring goes to have a look at it."

"Seconded? Thank you, Condon," said the chairman. "Those in favour? Carried."

"I don't want to start a red herring—no pun intended," said the hesitant voice of a middle-aged man who was seated next to the treasurer, "but don't I remember that there was something rather unsatisfactory and mysterious about Fellowby's death? And didn't it take place very unexpectedly almost as soon as he'd reported upon this Parsons Purity place? He was your predecessor as secretary, Herring, as, of course, you know."

"Thanks very much for the warning, Dewes," said Timothy, grinning. "What *is* this church then? Tutankhamen's desecrated tomb?"

"There was nothing mysterious about Fellowby's death," said the treasurer. "He had a coronary . . ."

"As which of us shall not?" asked the young member, with his habitual flippancy.

"Well, if that's that, let's get on," said the chairman. "The next item on the agenda is this report of death-watch beetle at Stolford All Saints. The surveyor's report says . . ."

As soon as the meeting was over, Timothy Herring made the customary note in the members' book known as *Abstracions*, and placed the Fellowby report on Parsons Purity church in his briefcase. When he was leaving, the diffident, middle-aged man who had voiced

doubts about the cause of Fellowby's death was waiting on the landing. He and Timothy were the last to leave.

"I say, Herring," said his companion, as they walked down the stairs, "you'll exercise precautions, won't you?"

"I always do," Timothy replied. "About anything in particular, do you mean?"

"Well, yes. I am thinking about this place you're to visit. This village of Parsons Purity, you know."

"Oh, yes. You had misgivings about it. You voiced them at the meeting."

"All I suggest is that you have a care." They reached the hall door. The doorkeeper held it open and saluted.

"Goodnight, Mr. Herring. Goodnight, Mr. Dewes."

"Goodnight, Bishop," said Timothy. "Yes, Dewes, you were saying?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. That is, I know nothing. Tell me, Herring, do you believe in witchcraft? Oh, well, never mind. Just have a care, my dear fellow, just have a care. Fellowby thought the vicar and the squire were both mad, you know. Hi, taxi! Best of luck, my dear Herring! Goodbye, goodbye! Best of luck!"

Timothy walked home, or, rather, to his club, where they kept a bedroom for him unless he let them know that he would be out of England for a stated length of time. It was generally understood that he possessed a considerable fortune and what were popularly thought of as gadabout habits. It was known only to his close friends that he was a bachelor. There were times when a mythical wife in the background had proved a very present help in trouble. He proceeded to keep up the fiction as soon as he reached his club.

"Tell the garage to see that my car is well juiced up, Robson. I shall want it tomorrow morning for a longish trip."

“Verra guid, sir.”

“Oh, and see that the usual telegram to my wife is sent off, will you?” (*For wife, read personal manservant.*)

“Surely, surely, Mr. Herring.”

“Tell her I am off to a village called Parsons Purity, near Cranthorne Minster. She knows where it is. Do you believe in witchcraft, Robson?”

The porter wagged his head.

“That will be a difficult question to answer, sir. On the one hand, we have the word of King James VI, a verra intelligent monarch, although not an unco’ guid mon. He refuted Reginald Scot, ye’ll mind, no doubt, but he was upheld, ay, forty years later, by no less a scholar than Sir Thomas Browne himself. Ye’ll mind what Sir Thomas Browne wrote in his wee book? There is no doubt Sir Thomas believed in witchcraft.”

“But Sir Thomas Browne could believe anything. He even said, ‘I could believe that Spirits use with man the act of carnality, and that in both sexes,’ if you remember your *Religio Medici*,” protested Timothy.

“Ay, that is the gist of what I’m putting to ye, Mr. Herring. He had a firm belief in witchcraft.”

“But he also says, ‘Thus I think at first a great part of philosophy was witchcraft.’ That proves *my* point. If he could believe that philosophy and witchcraft were identical, obviously he could believe anything, and therefore his thoughts, so far as our present discussion is concerned, have no value.”

“I see ye are determined to have it your own way, sir, but what do ye make of the Roman writer, Apuleius? Ye’ll not deny that *he* believed in witchcraft?”

“He defended himself against the charge that he practised it. As for believing in it, yes, he probably did. He was an African. You know, Robson, a man of your education . . .”

“Awa’ wi’ ye, Mr. Herring! I am a man of wide and, I trust, profitable reading, and that is the whole of it. But what brings ye on to such a subject as witchcraft, sir?”

“Oh, things, things. See that I’m called by eight o’clock tomorrow morning, will you?”

“Surely, surely. Mr. Charles Williams, for whose work I have a high regard, for all that he has his abstruse moments, says in a passage of his book on witchcraft that in the airy Middle Ages there was what he calls ‘the gradual identification of sorcery and heresy.’ What make ye of that thought, Mr. Herring?”

“Well, there were the charges against Joan of Arc, of course. Would you call it sorcery, or would you describe it as heresy, to replace a church roof with corrugated iron instead of using lead?”

“I wouldna’ call it either, sir. Iron, I hear tell, is an antidote to the power of witchcraft, and I would not think that a corrugated iron roof was a concession to heresy either. My mother’s wee hen-house is covered with it, and herself a most devout woman.”

“Be that as it may, you still haven’t answered my first question: do *you* believe in witchcraft?”

“Some of those who were inspired to inscribe their thoughts in the Good Book believed in it, sir.”

“Robson, you’re as incorrigible and as intransigent as the Delphic Oracle!”

“Yon oracular pronouncements were not witchcraft, but chicanery, sir.”

Timothy laughed and went up to his room. There he lit a pipe and sat down to study Fellowby’s report. He returned it to his brief-case, bathed and changed, and took a taxi to the home of the chairman of the Phisbe committee, where he had an invitation to dine. The chairman was also the president of the Society.

“I am told, Timothy dear,” said his hostess, “that you are about to re-roof Tutankhamen’s tomb with old

iron.”

*“‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair,’”*

Timothy responded, lifting his glass to her.

“No, but, really, Tim, is there any truth in this story that the last Phisbe man who went there died an unnatural death?”

“Are we referring to Tutankhamen’s tomb?”

“Don’t be silly! You know I’m talking about Parsons Pleasure.”

“Then you shouldn’t be. It’s not a ladylike subject.”

“I . . . you idiot! You know what I mean.”

“Perish the thought! I wouldn’t venture to know what you mean.”

“Well, this village you’re going to look at. What about it?”

“That is what I have to find out. Parsons Purity is its name, and it seems to be spelt without any apostrophe S, if you are interested.”

“So you don’t know whether it refers to one or more parsons?”

“It’s probably a corruption of Persons Parity, you know. A throw-back to those dear old democratic days when Adam delved and Eve span.”

“Spun . . . and stop being silly!”

“No, no! It had to rhyme with, ‘Who was then the gentleman?’ Of course, they may have pronounced it ‘gentlemun.’ Anyway, I’m not being silly. It takes brains to be silly, nowadays. Ask any successful clown.”

On the following morning Timothy set off in his car. In his brief-case he carried the letter of complaint from Mrs. Stretton, an official letter signed by the president of Phisbe, a sketching block and an Ordnance Survey

map, and along with these and other tools of his trade, three well-thumbed books. *What Happens in Hamlet*, by John Dover Wilson, *John Macnab*—John Buchan's best story, Timothy thought—and the collected ghost stories of M. R. James.

Fellowby had stayed at the nearest inn to Parsons Purity. It faced the market square in the town of Cranthorne Minster, occupying most of the south side. Shops and a branch of Barclay's Bank were on the west, more shops were on the north side, and the ancient minster church was tucked away behind an auctioneer's and a row of shops on the east, and was reached from the square by a narrow road which fronted a small public house and a Woolworth store.

Upon arriving at the inn, which, by virtue of possessing five bedrooms and a bathroom, dignified itself by the name of the *Nesting Pheasant Hotel*, Timothy clocked in at the desk, was shown to his room, washed, and went down to the bar. It was furnished with three long tables in front of a wooden settle which ran the whole length of the room. Half-a-dozen high stools stood at the counter. On the walls were a set of prints depicting some members of dragoon regiments from 1775 onwards and, in glass cases at the far end, were two well-worn military uniforms, one for an officer of the 14th Hussars in South Africa service dress of the year 1900 and the other for a sergeant of the 11th in 1904. A coloured portrait of Sir Winston Churchill dominated the partition behind the bar, and a faded photograph of the local cricket team, surmounted by a County cap (presumably an accolade bestowed in times past upon the landlord or his father) was hanging in a place of honour below the portrait. A tortoiseshell cat lay asleep on an end of the counter beside a hideous yellow vase. This vase contained some of the finest

dahlias Timothy had ever seen. He ordered a drink and commented admiringly upon the flowers.

"Ah," said the barman, "Mr. Ashford brings 'em in once a week for the gov'nor's missus. Won prizes with dahlias three year running at the flower show at Parsons Purity."

"Parsons Purity?" said Timothy. "Isn't that the place where they've got a nice little old church?"

"Maybe," said an old man standing beside him. "Most of the villages roundabout here have a nice little old church. What you want to see is our minster. Stood these eight hundred and fifty year, our minster have, ah, and like to stand till Doomsday if us don't have they atom bombs. You don't want to waste time with village churches when you got our minster just acrost the way."

"Now I," said a man on a stool at the end of the counter, "don't go so much for dahlias. What I say is, why not a rock garden? In a rock garden you get variety. And variety, so I hear say, is the spice of life."

"Rock gardens? I wouldn't be bothered with 'em," said a man seated at one of the long tables. "Fiddly, that's what they be. Roses, now! You've got something when you've planted a nice rose bed. What's more, roses beant no trouble, no trouble whatever. Why, seven year ago it would be . . ."

"All up the minster paths," said the old man, pursuing a subject which seemed to be the uppermost one in his mind, "be Queen Elizabeth, and a lovely rose that is. Look really nice, do our Queen Elizabeth, and the setting's right, too. The minster being grey—all the stone being grey, and the graves and such—well, there you are. Pink, you see. Pink against the grey stone. You don't want to go wasting your time with village churches when you got our minster. Eight hundred and

fifty year old, and as solid as when it was built. So long, Bob. See you tomorrow. Good day, all."

"Who's that?" asked Timothy, when the swing door had closed behind the old man.

"Elias Bagge, and an old windbag he is," said the barman. "We're all proud of the minster. Brings visitors to the place. But with him, well, he's fanatical. Don't you, whatever you do, sir, let him invygle you down to the crypt, or up to what he calls the archives. He'll keep you there an hour or more, and gassing away all the time like it belonged to him personal. Still, there's no harm in him that I know of, beyond being a right old belly-ache when he gets on to the subject of his wrongs. We was lucky today, I reckon."

"Well, his wife was run down and killed last year," said the rock gardener. "Anybody could be excused for bellyaching about that."

"Might be a rare bit of luck for some people," said the rose-grower darkly, "But he's right about Queen Elizabeth. I recommended it to 'em special and got the price knocked down, too. Mind you, I prefers a bit of yellow, myself. Old Gold, now. That's a beautiful rose. Keeps its colour right through the blooming, which some yellows, I'm bound to say, don't. Hullo, hullo!" he added, in a low and guarded tone, as a tall, thin, middle-aged man in tweeds came into the bar. "Look who's here!"

From the way in which the men at the counter moved aside to give the newcomer room, Timothy concluded that he was either disliked or was a person of importance, or, possibly, both. He himself remained where he was and finished his pint, while the newcomer ordered stout. Then the conversation, which had lapsed for a moment, went on.

"Peace, that's a nice rose for you," said the rose-fancier. "Easy to grow, don't want much pruning, big

flowers and plenty of 'em, pretty colour, good growth in the foliage—the lot.”

“Grammer Jenny is a better rose nor Peace,” said a man in gaiters.

“T’other or which. Same stock. Jenny’s newer, that’s all.”

“I still say a rock garden is the best to have, and in these parts the stone is easy enough to come by. Just go along to the quarry and help yourself when they finished work for the night. Nobody misses a few good chunks, and there’s always plenty laying around.”

“Ah, plenty. Enough to bash people’s heads in with, too,” said the rose-grower. “Anyway, that’s ancient history. Now, with roses . . .”

“Well, all right, then. What’s to stop you having roses on a rock garden?” interrupted the enthusiast. “Have to be dwarf ones, of course, but they’re quite as pretty as the real thing—a sight prettier, in my opinion. Why, on mine I’ve got red, pink, yellow, and white. Fairy roses my little girl calls ‘em.”

“She’s not far out, at that,” said an elderly man in a grey suit, who, so far, had not spoken. “The first of the miniature roses was *Rosa rouletti*, originally from China, and it was nicknamed the Fairy Rose because of its size. It is not, however, in my opinion—and I am supported by no less an authority than Mrs. Anna N. Griffith—it is not an entirely happy addition to a rock garden. It does not seem in the right society there. If you *must* put a rose in a rock garden, the only really permissible specimen is the dwarf form of *Rosa pendulina*, Elliott’s variety.”

“How’s that, then, sir?” asked the barman, as nobody else seemed prepared to make a remark.

“It comes from the Alps.” The grey-suited elderly man finished his whisky, nodded to the company and

walked out through the swing door which opened on to a passage leading to the lounge and the dining-room.

"Who was that?" asked Timothy.

"Mr. Gerald Manciple. Got a big house just outside the town. Don't often condescend to speak to the likes of us. Comes over every now and again of a Sunday to read the lesson at Martins, on account of knowing the Reverend Austin Fitzrichard from college days, or something of that," said the barman. "Has his lunch here Thursdays, regular. Care to glance over the menu for today, sir?" The waiter had just brought a handwritten copy into the bar. Recognising this as a strong hint that no more was going to be said about Mr. Gerald Manciple in front of present company, and curious to know why this should be, Timothy scanned the menu, finished his drink and ordered a chaser of gin.

The man in tweeds, for whom room had been made so hastily at the bar, looked at the door through which Manciple had passed, muttered something, drained his glass, and pushed it towards the barman.

"Same again, Sir Ganymede?"

"Same again? Don't ask silly questions, Bob! Mr. Manciple staying here for lunch?"

"I couldn't say, sir. Usually does, of a Thursday."

"Well, this is Thursday, isn't it? Find out whether he's staying. No, never mind. I'll take a look for myself."

He finished his drink amid silence, slammed down the glass, and stalked out.

"Funny for *him* to come in of a Thursday," said the barman, in a confidential tone to the man in gaiters, "seeing he knows as well as I do as it's Mr. Manciple's day."

"Something behind it, like. He had a look in his eye, if you ask me. Summat blowing up, I wouldn't wonder.

Never happy, Sir Ganymede, unless he's making trouble for somebody."

"No wonder Mr. Manciple skedaddled. I bet he *don't* stay to lunch now he knows Sir Ganymede is here," said the rose grower. "Another of the same, Bob, please."

"And who might Sir Ganymede be?" Timothy enquired, although this information was contained in Mrs. Stretton's letter. There could not be two men called Sir Ganymede to be found in the same county and so near to the village of Parsons Purity. The surname, however, had not been mentioned by Mrs. Stretton.

"Why, Sir Ganymede Trogett. Makes himself out to be squire of Parsons Purity, as where you mentioned you was going to look over the church. The Trogetts have lived in these parts for twenty generations, so it's reckoned. There's Trogetts here, there, and everywhere, farmers most of 'em, and there's Mr. John Trogett, the lawyer, and his brother, Mr. Miles, the bank manager, and a whole lot more."

"Is he liked?—Sir Ganymede, I mean. Sympathetic landlord, good employer, dedicated public servant, lenient magistrate—all that kind of thing?"

"He's a bloomin' menace," said the rock garden man. "Pinches my plants. I'm waiting to catch him at it, that's all. He's got a hundred yards of rockeries at Parsons Purity, up at the Hall there, and he comes snooping round my place when I'm not about and bloody well helps himself. If he can't afford to stock his rockeries, let him go without, that's what I say."

"You've never caught him at it, though, 'Orry," said the man in gaiters. "You're only going on suspicion."

"Who else has got a rock garden similar to mine, then? You tell me that! Ah, and it's my belief he ran over my dog on purpose, just to put poor old Buster out

of the way, so as he could get into my place more easy.”

“Dog shouldn’t a-been roving the streets. Bound to cause accidents. And your Buster used to rush out at cars and bark at ’em. Ah, and more times than not he’s nearly had me by the ankle when I’ve been on my bike,” said the man at the table.

Timothy went out by the swing doors and into the dining-room. There were only five tables and all were occupied.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the waiter, “but I’m afraid you’ll have to wait. Very full, sir, this morning.”

Timothy was about to turn away when a peremptory voice called out,

“Hey! William!”

“Yes, sir?” said the waiter, going over to Sir Ganymede, who was sitting alone. “Something not to your liking?”

“Ask the gentleman if he’d care to share my table.”

Timothy disliked sharing a table with a stranger, although, like most people, he felt illogically affronted by being told he must wait for his meal. On this occasion he was tempted by the hope that it might be possible to learn something about the situation at Parsons Purity from one who, presumably, would have inside information about the state of the church roof, and, possibly, other matters of interest, so he bowed and said,

“Very civil of you, sir. Thanks very much.” Then he seated himself opposite the squire. The latter took no more notice of him for a time. Timothy finished his soup and was beginning upon a plate of roast mutton with red currant jelly and three vegetables when the squire, who was eating ice-cream, looked up and asked,

“Staying here?”

“Well, for a day or two,” Timothy replied. “I’m interested in old churches and so forth, and I believe there are quite a number within motoring distance, so I thought I’d make this place my centre.”

“You’re interested in old churches, are you? Well, there’s the minster here. Rather good, so they tell me. Never been inside it myself,” said Sir Ganymede, laying down his spoon.

“Yes, well, not exactly a village church, is it? I’d rather thought of having a look at Parsons Purity. I believe it’s in the neighbourhood,” said Timothy.

“Parsons Purity? Why, yes, it’s in the neighbourhood. I live there. Two miles as the crow flies, five miles as the main road runs, eight miles as the bus (at a most extortionate fare, let me warn you) meanders upon its way. Oh, yes, it’s in the neighbourhood, I suppose.”

“I shall be all right, then. I came down by car.”

“You did? Splendid! Then you won’t have any objection, I trust, to giving me a lift? Otherwise, I shall have to catch the bus. Give me a lift, what? I live in Parsons Purity. I said so. Show you round the church, if you like.”

“It will be a pleasure,” said Timothy, somewhat surprised that so important a local big-wig should not have a car of his own. The explanation was immediately forthcoming.

“The fact is, you see, my dear chap,” said Sir Ganymede confidentially, “they’re not too keen to let me drive. To cut the story short, they’ve taken my licence away. Manciple was on the bench, of course. Don’t wonder he wouldn’t stay to lunch and look me in the eye. Never could *stand* the chap, and it’s entirely mutual, so they took my licence away.”

“I shall be delighted to give you a lift, sir. By the way, my name’s Herring.”

“Oh, I’m Troggett, my dear chap, Troggett. Everyone knows me about here.”

“I bet they do,” thought Timothy, remembering the conversation in the bar. He said, “I’m representing my Society. I’ve a particular interest in the church at Parsons Purity.”

“Have you? Yes, they had the infernal crust to keep me off the road, and all for running down a couple of damn-fool women who couldn’t make up their minds whether to cross or not. I ask you!”

“Bad luck!” said Timothy. “Couldn’t you plead extenuating circumstances?”

“They wouldn’t listen, my dear chap, they simply wouldn’t listen. It was the tramping fellow and somebody’s blasted dog that let me down. I might have got away with the blasted women, and even the tramping fellow, but not the blasted dog.”

“Oh, I see. I take it you saw service with the Tank Corps.”

“Eh? No, no, I was with the Grenadiers.” He looked piercingly at Timothy, his middle-aged aristocratic façade losing some of its natural dignity by reason of a blob of vanilla ice-cream which had attached itself to the left-hand side of his moustache. His gaze expressed deep suspicion, but all he saw was a grave-faced, clean-shaven man of about thirty, with a sympathetic expression, an enquiring nose, and a good-tempered but purposeful mouth. He added, after he had made his inspection, “Don’t ask for the ice-cream. It’s filthy. William, bring me a large whisky. Your ice-cream’s filthy! *Filthy!* Do you hear?”

“Very good, Sir Ganymede,” said the waiter. “And for you, sir?”

“Cheese and biscuits,” said Timothy, “and I’ll have a large whisky, too. The room number is three.”

“Very handsome of you, sir,” said the baronet. “Five bob saved is five bob earned, eh? I shall drink your health, sir.”

Slightly astonished to discover that he was to pay for both whiskies, Timothy bowed politely, and said that the pleasure was his.

CHAPTER TWO

Mrs. Stretton

"Nice little box of tricks, this," said Sir Ganymede, casting an approving and envious eye over Timothy's Humber.

"Yes," said Timothy. "Hop in, sir, won't you? Property of Phisbe, actually, but I have *carte blanche* to use it." (This was another of his fictions. The car was his own, but in Phisbe's interests he usually disguised the fact that he was a man of substance.)

"Thisbe? Your wife, I take it?" said the baronet, when the car had been backed out on to the roadway and was following a narrow one-way street which ran out of the square and three-quarters of the way round the minster before it turned on to the secondary road for Parsons Purity.

"No. Phisbe is the name of my Society."

"Never heard of it."

"You may know it under its full title. Mrs. Stretton got on to us, as I think you've heard."

"Yes, she told Mrs. Prynne, and Prynne told me. Some nonsense about the church roof, wasn't it?"

"Yes, if you call that nonsense. I am wondering whether you can tell me any more than she did. I have to report on it to my Society."

"Thought you were over-civil about giving me a drink and a lift," said Sir Ganymede, beginning to

laugh. "Church roof? Damn the church roof! You're one of these snooping fellows, are you? Well, you'll get no change out of me!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Timothy. "I've no connection with the local council or government planners and so forth. My Society is a private body which exists to help in the preservation and restoration of ancient buildings, that's all." The car sailed over a broad bridge across a sluggish and beautiful river. "My snooping is confined to visiting buildings which are brought to our notice, and then I report upon them. There's nothing more to it than that."

The baronet made no reply. The car slid past water-meadows and pollarded willows until a fork in the road indicated a choice of routes. Timothy took the left-hand slant on the advice of a signpost, and the road made a series of longish bends as it ascended a hill. There were fields on one side, some new bungalows on the other, and then, as the way became steeper and the bends more numerous, a wide and beautiful view opened up, disclosing wooded slopes, with moorland beyond them and a far-off landscape of hills.

"Turn left," said Sir Ganymede, when the car reached the crossroads, "and then to the right about two hundred yards up the road. You'll see a garage. Turn there."

Timothy thanked him for these instructions. They took the turning he had indicated, and the road continued uphill until they reached a small post-office. Then it dropped steadily downwards until, opposite pine-woods, there was the turning to Parsons Purity. The road here was fairly straight, and was bordered by wide grass verges, with a ditch on the left-hand side. Further on there was a brick-built house bordered by a nursery garden and greenhouses.

"Fellow called Rickaby," said Sir Ganymede, jerking his head. Undercuts my prices. / sell peas and raspberries; *he* sells peas and raspberries. Damn feller hates my guts, and it's mutual, I can tell you!"

The road dwindled into a rough-surfaced lane at the end of which was a level crossing. Beyond this lay Parsons Purity church and a gracious Georgian house.

"Where do you want me to put you down?" Timothy enquired. "Or are you still prepared to show me over the church?"

"No, no. You'll snoop better on your own, my dear chap, especially if that Stretton woman has briefed you. Anyway, I live here." He indicated the Georgian house, and continued, "You might note, though, that the vicar, indescribable little twerp though he is, has my fullest support in the matter of the roof, yes, my fullest support. You won't forget that, will you?"

Timothy pulled up at the wrought-iron gates, and then, having set down his passenger, he backed on to the grass which bordered the churchyard wall. He locked the car and walked in through the lych-gate. He looked up at the roof. So far, not even the objectionable corrugated iron protected it. Some heavy tarpaulins had been thrown across the apex of the rafters and were held in position by chunks of stone encased in string bags suspended on pieces of rope in something of the manner in which Hebridean crofters secure their roofs against gales.

The west door of the church was a good example of transitional Norman work. The small north door was blocked up. Near it was the entrance to the crypt. Timothy walked on. The nave had early Norman windows, chevron-moulded, and the short, flat buttresses were of the same period. The Early English chancel had a three-light east window and the south porch, added in the fifteenth century, led to a Norman

doorway, chevron-moulded like the windows, and having a fine tympanum showing Christ in Majesty.

The door was unlocked and Timothy went in.

Just inside the doorway on the right-hand side was a holy water stoup, added, judging from its conformity, at the same time as the porch, and badly defaced by the iconoclasts of the mid-seventeenth century.

Timothy wondered, without troubling himself much about it, why the builders had not placed the stone basin in the more usual position outside in the porch instead of just inside the doorway to the church, but this was not unique. He had seen other examples.

The interior of the building was gloomy and restful. The only lighting in the nave was from the small, round-headed, deeply recessed Norman windows, and the chancel, although furnished with the tall, narrow lights of the thirteenth century, was scarcely less dim. The chancel arch had been widened at the same time, he decided, as the insertion of the transitional Norman west door. There were a couple of good fourteenth-century brasses on the floor near the pulpit, and there were the blocked-off remains of the rood stair. He walked back a bit, seated himself in a pew and looked up at the roof.

He could do no more than guess at its construction, for it had been given a boarded ceiling. From what he had seen of the exterior, however, he deduced a trussed-rafter roof, a type common in the thirteenth century and likely enough of even earlier date. The roof, as he had noticed when he first approached the church, was high-pitched, and this, added to the fact that the interior boarding formed a polygonal canted barrel of the type known as a wagon-ceiling, disposed him to think that the construction between this ceiling and the tarpaulins consisted of pairs of rafters framed together by a system of ties and struts, so that each

pair, in effect, formed a strong and simple truss. Without the interior boarding, therefore, the picture would be of a series of open triangles at the steepest part of the roof, underpinned and secured by horizontal struts strengthened by canted short beams. The pressure of the roof on the walls would be taken by further short perpendicular struts resting on a corbel table.

“Yes,” muttered Timothy, “I shall have to take a look at the outside when we can get those tarpaulins off.” He made a note and apostrophised the vicar. “Well, my dear Reverend Sir, you certainly do *not* get away with your dirty, hideous, slummy old corrugated iron! Not if that roof’s what I think it is.”

He stood up and walked towards the west door. Before he reached it, his attention was attracted to the font and he went over to look at it. There was no doubt about its age, and there was no doubt about its rarity, for it was one of only about thirty known examples in England of a Norman font made entirely of lead. It was a squat, tub-like structure standing flat on the ground, and it bore patterning and decoration in the form of bas-relief replicas of Norman arches and pillars, with, above these, an effect of intertwined basketry work.

“Nice!” said Timothy aloud. “I wonder why the vandals didn’t pinch it when they stole the lead from the roof.” He was strolling towards the door, having completed his preliminary inspection, when from the organ came the magnificent thunder of *Laudate Dominum*. Timothy sat down in a pew to listen. The hymn was tried over two or three times and was followed by a *motet* by Thomas Tallis, a setting of the *Te Deum* by Stanford, and then (surprisingly) by a brilliant rendering of a *toccata* in G major by Dubois.

Timothy sat on, hoping for more, but when the last notes had ceased to set the dim air tingling, a long

silence seemed to indicate that the unseen organist had departed. Timothy went along to find out whether this was so, and discovered that the organ loft, approached by three wooden steps, could be reached from the vestry, and that the organist must have entered and left the building by an unlocked door which led directly from the vestry to that part of the churchyard which was opposite the vicarage.

Timothy took the same route, but followed a narrow gravel path round the outside of the church until he came, on the north side, to the short flight of shallow stone steps which led down to the crypt. There was a switch just inside the open doorway, and the notice beneath it, as Timothy discovered when he put on the light, read *Kindly Switch Off When Leaving*.

The crypt bore out Fellowby's description. Timothy looked at the scalloped capitals of the pillars and, much longer, at the solitary pillar with the carvings. It was an enticing and exciting example of late Norman work, grotesque and almost frightening in its mixture of ironic humour and deadly hate. Timothy made up his mind to ask permission of the vicar to take photographs.

Reluctantly leaving the pillar, but promising himself further inspection of it, he identified the partially blocked turret stairway and climbed the four steps which were all that remained of an ancient means of access to the chancel. He also made out two completely blocked doorways which had once led, by ramped passages, to the nave, and which had formed, he thought, part of a processional walk. The third doorway, still open, led into the barrel-vaulted room mentioned by Fellowby in his report. The little room was now entirely bare, and the dank air was unpleasantly cold.

Timothy stepped out into the churchyard again and reentered the church. His object was to find out, if he

could, at what points the passages from the crypt had connected with the nave. He did not expect to be successful. An aisle had been added to the nave in the late thirteenth century, and the builders, he was pretty sure, would have eliminated earlier work. There was a small chapel at the east end of this aisle. He remembered that in Fellowby's notes it had been called Dame Alice's Rest. He thought he would take a look at it, and, giving up what had been, in any case, a forlorn hope, he passed through an ancient doorway set in a small oak screen.

The little chapel contained an altar dedicated to the Virgin, a banner of the local Women's Guild, four fald-stools, and, recessed into the thickness of the wall, the tomb, presumably, of Dame Alice herself. This was in a form reminiscent of an Easter sepulchre, and, on a stone base carved with quatrefoils, it bore the effigy of the lady in Purbeck marble. Her thin, beautifully rendered hands were placed together as in prayer, and a masterfully serene half-smile upon her lips made nonsense of the otherwise traditionally stiff and pious pose.

Timothy apostrophised the effigy.

"Quite a girl, weren't you?"

"Yes, and an ancestor of mine, into the bargain," said a voice almost at his elbow. He swung round. There was a broad strip of cocoa-matting covering most of the floor of the little chapel and it had deadened the sound of footsteps. Just behind him, wearing a smile so like that on the lips of the carving that it rendered her assertion of a common origin unnecessary, stood a woman of perhaps his own age.

"I saw you come out of our crypt," she said, "and I have a hunch that you must be Mr. Herring. The letter from your committee came this morning."

“Then you must be Mrs. Stretton. How do you do? Was it you I heard playing the organ so very beautifully a short time ago?”

“How did you guess?”

“You have a musician’s hands.” But he gestured not at those of the living woman, but at those of the dead one. The living woman smiled.

“Let’s go to my place and have a cup of tea, when you’ve quite finished here,” she said, “and then you can ask me anything you want to know, and I’ll answer you if I can. Don’t hurry. I often come along here to have a word with her, you know.”

She sank on her knees at one of the fald-stools and covered her face. Timothy tip-toed out. He went to the far end of the nave and tried the door to the tower staircase, but, as he had anticipated, it was locked. He would need to consult the vicar about the repairs to the roof of the church, so he decided that at the same time he would ask permission to have the door to the staircase unlocked so that he could climb the tower. It should be possible in this way to obtain a good view of the roof, he thought.

He returned to the chancel and was studying three beautiful Early English sedilia, with a matching arch over the adjacent piscina, when Mrs. Stretton joined him.

“Shall we walk?” she asked. “It’s not far.”

“I have my car.”

Her house was one converted from two adjoining cottages. She had had the party wall between two rooms in the right-hand cottage removed and a large window inserted behind where Timothy assumed the kitchen sink to have been. The long room which resulted now held a grand piano, some comfortable armchairs, a bookcase, and a standard lamp. There were flowers on the window-ledge and a small table

laden with piles of music books and sheet music stood in an alcove beside a modern fireplace. It was difficult to connect the pleasant, tasteful, lived-in room with the writer of the hysterical letter which had brought Timothy to Parsons Purity.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Stretton. "I won't be a moment making the tea. Help yourself to a book if you want something to do while I'm gone."

Timothy went over to the bookcase. Mrs. Stretton appeared to have a catholic taste in literature. The novels of Ivy Compton Burnett neighboured those of Dornford Yates. P. G. Wodehouse appeared unmoved by his proximity to Mary Webb, and she, again, accepted without comment the presence on her shelf of Mrs. Warren, Saint Joan, Lady Chatterley, and Huckleberry Finn.

Timothy had picked up and put back travel books, poetry, commentaries on the New Testament, a book on palmistry, and another on black magic, and was turning the pages of the *Trial of Mary Blandy* when his hostess reappeared with the tea-tray. Timothy replaced the book and took the tray from her while she retired in search of cake.

"Now," she said, "what do you want to know? Has your Society decided to take action? It almost looks as though it had, or they wouldn't have sent you down."

"Oh, you mustn't assume all that, I'm afraid," said Timothy. "Two lumps, please. I'm just reconnoitring, you know. We always have a look at a place when we've received a letter. You did write the one which had your name at the end, I suppose?"

"Why should you ask that?"

"Because you don't seem to fit with the general tone of the letter."

She laughed.

"What do you mean?"

"The letter was described by me to my committee as long-winded, peevish, and hysterical."

"I don't strike you like that?"

"Not in the least. You certainly haven't been long-winded so far, you seem equable and sweet-tempered, and I would say that, far from being hysterical, you are good-humoured, well-balanced, and charming. Of course, the books over there are a bit of a problem."

"Oh, in what way?"

"Well, look at them!" He waved a slice of cake in the general direction of the bookcase.

"I look at them every day. I'm very fond of my books," she protested.

"I imagine that you don't live alone here."

"What makes you say that?"

Well, I should have thought the Compton Burnett, the Wodehouse, the Shaw, the poetry, possibly the travel books, and Huckleberry Finn belonged to one type of person, the Dornford Yates, Lady Chatterley, the commentaries, the Tria, and the bits of mumbo jumbo to another."

"I don't know that I care about being typed."

"Don't hedge!"

"All right, then. Another cup of tea? You're quite right, of course. I don't live alone. That is, I didn't until we separated."

"Oh, I see. I'm sorry."

"I'm not. Let's talk about the church. *Are* you going to do anything about it?"

"My job at present, now that I've visited it, is to see the state of the roof and then report to my Society. I'm inclined to think that it must be properly repaired at all costs, but we have to find out what those costs are likely to be. When I've sent in my report, my next step will be to try to galvanise this neighbourhood into facing facts and paying up."

"You'll never get any money in Parsons Purity. People don't like the vicar."

"I don't like the vicar, either, if he thinks he can get away with re-roofing a gem of a church with corrugated iron and those perishing ground-sheets. But why should his popularity, or the reverse, make that much difference? Aren't people proud of the church for its own sake? My Society has a rooted objection to helping people who are not prepared to do a bit towards helping themselves. We wouldn't necessarily expect the village to meet the full cost, or anything like it, but we *would* expect them to show a tangible measure of goodwill."

"Yes, I see. That seems fair enough. Do have another piece of cake. Well, *I'm* willing to subscribe, but I don't want my name to be the first on the list, or even in the top ten. It wouldn't do the scheme much good if my name appeared at all, in fact, so my contribution had better be anonymous."

"Oh, really? How's that, then?"

"I'm not very popular in the village, same like the vicar."

"Why, what have you been up to?"

"That doesn't matter. You can take my word for it that my name on your subscription list would take everybody else's name off it."

Timothy was intrigued by this, but it was evident that for Mrs. Stretton the subject was now closed. He asked how long the vicar had been in Parsons Purity.

"I deduce he's comparatively new here," he added.

"Oh, he's not all that new here, but people have decided that he isn't serious enough. He allows pop music and dancing in the church hall, and runs excursions to Blackpool for the teenagers. Moreover, he has cut out the old folks' Christmas dinner. He says it gives them indigestion and an unjustifiable sense of

their own importance. He says the old have had their fun and their day and ought to be preparing themselves to leave this life piously and gracefully, if they want to inherit another and a better one. He spent some of the money saved last year from their Christmas dinner in buying more coal for them, though. It's only fair to tell you that."

"And what do the old people think of the change?"

"Generally speaking, I don't know, but I was told that old Tom Tavernor, who always gets drunk when he draws his pension on Fridays, told them in the *Green Man* that he expected to get plenty of coal in hell, but that he hardly supposed they would give Christmas dinners there."

"Had Tom any views on the repair of the church roof?"

"Not that I know of. Half the village loathe the vicar and don't care two straws about the church."

"So you're quite certain they won't be prepared to put their hands in their pockets? That isn't altogether our experience, you know. Our best results of a practical nature seem to come from the people who profess to be agnostic, and even from downright atheists."

"Really? One lot are sitting on the fence, I suppose, and the others tell you they couldn't care less about what the building is used for, but if it's a good building of its kind it's worth preserving. Is that the way it goes?"

"You might be one of them yourself!"

"Well, perhaps I am."

"Yet you play the organ in church."

"Oh, yes, but only for my own satisfaction, and not at all to the glory of God."

"Oh, you'd be surprised!" said Timothy lightly.

"Thank you very much for the tea. Am I likely to find

the vicar at home at this hour of a Thursday afternoon?"

"I have no idea. Must you really go? You're rather an exciting change after most of the people here. Do stay a little longer, won't you?"

"I'll wash up the tea-things, then, and. perhaps you'll play to me as a reward. Will you?" He gestured towards the grand piano.

"We won't wash up. Trudi can do that when she comes in. She's my *au pair* girl, and a complete horror. Still, she's company. I should hate to be alone in this house at night. What would you like me to play?"

Timothy went across to the pile of music and turned it over.

"Play this, please," he said, and handed her Reizenstein's *Scherzo in A*.

CHAPTER THREE

Perplexities

The vicar was in, and at liberty. He was a bony, expansively cheerful man of about forty, and he greeted Timothy as though he had known him all his life.

“Come in, come in,” he said, “and tell me what I can do for you. We’re always ready to listen to people’s troubles. That’s what we’re here for, eh?”

“Then I hope I shan’t be thought to waste your time,” said Timothy, who disliked and distrusted professional *bonhomie*, “if I tell you that I have come about the state of the church roof. My card, sir.”

“Mr. Timothy Francis Herring, Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest,” said the vicar, reading aloud from the card. “Oh, well, come in, anyway, although I’m afraid you’re a bit too late. The matter is already under review. No doubt you were misled by seeing the tarpaulins.”

“Not in the least. I only hope they indicate a change of mind about the corrugated iron.”

“My *dear* Mr. Herring! You seem to be exceptionally well-informed! But do sit down.”

Timothy, accepting the change of tone and a chair, placed his brief-case on the floor beside the latter.

“My Society is interested in your church, Vicar,” he began.

“Winterbottom, my dear man, Winterbottom. Don’t let us stand on ceremony. Do you mean that your Society would like to bring a party to visit us? That can be arranged as soon as we have the new roof.”

“It is about the new roof that I have come to see you. A building such as yours should be roofed with lead, or suitable tiles.”

“But think of the expense, my dear Herring! Unjustifiable expense is anathema to me.”

“So it is to my Society, but, in this case, surely, the expense would not be unjustifiable? Your church is a delightful example of its kind, and merits the greatest care in its preservation.”

“It *will* be preserved, my dear fellow, and adequately. The House of God does not depend upon its outer aspect nor upon the work done by men’s hands, you know.”

“I agree about that, of course, in principle, but isn’t it up to your parishioners to look after their church to the best of their ability?”

“That is exactly what we propose to do—to look after it *to the best of our ability*.”

“Oh, but, surely . . .”

“Mr. Herring,” said the vicar, dropping his comradely tone, “if there is money to be spent, it must be spent in a better cause than in buying lead for a roof. That the church must be preserved I fully agree, but, so long as it is rendered safe against the elements and the creeping and cruel hand of time, I feel that we shall have done our duty by it and by our predecessors. There are those in the parish who do not agree with me, I know, but I feel I must disregard their arguments, however persuasive these may be. My conscience will allow me to do nothing else.”

“Even if those who could afford it were prepared to dip into their own pockets to defray part, at any rate, of

the price of the lead or the tiles, and the cost of the labour? Would your attitude remain the same in that case?"

"I have laid it down in private conversations, and also from the pulpit, that contributions of money for church work can be used to far better purpose than in the way you and some others propose. I fear that I have nothing more to add."

"Well, that's a pity," said Timothy, rising. "My Society would be willing to make a reasonable contribution towards the cost, but, of course, if you regard the price of a decent job on a building of considerable importance as a waste of money, that's all there is to it, I suppose. By the way, may I ask whether you always leave the church unlocked?"

"Night and day, Mr. Herring. Who am I to shut its doors against some poor vagrant, or someone in need of the consolation of prayer?"

"I only asked," said Timothy, "because I couldn't help wondering why, while they were about it, the thieves didn't steal the lead font as well as the lead off the roof."

To his consternation, this simple observation had the most extraordinary effect on the vicar. He took a pace backward, went very white, and said in a strained voice roughened with shock,

"How dare you! How dare you suggest such a thing! To steal the font would be sacrilege! Have you no feeling for anything sacred! As well suggest I pawn the altar vessels! Great heavens, Mr. Herring! Whatever next?"

"Well, I think it's up to you to tell *me* that," said Timothy, "and I'm sorry you won't even give me a hearing."

"I have heard too much, sir, far too much!"

"I should not have thought," said Timothy, coolly, "that you'd really heard anything at all."

"You have agitated me more than you know."

"I see that I have agitated you, and for that I am very sorry. But, Mr. Winterbottom, I assure you that I came here with the best of intentions. My Society received a full report of a survey made of your church some years ago by a member of ours, a Mr. Fellowby. He was so enthusiastic that when we heard about the lead from the roof being stolen . . ."

"Acquired, Mr. Herring. The seventh commandment and the fifth deadly sin are not involved, I assure you."

"Very well, Vicar. Acquired, if you prefer it. When my Society learned that the lead had been stripped off, and that it was your intention to re-roof the church with corrugated iron . . ."

"Who, may I ask, was your informant?"

"Your organist, Mrs. Stretton."

"Our organist? You are completely misinformed. Mrs. Stretton is not our organist. I would no more allow that harlot to accompany the services than I would invite the devil himself to do so!" The vicar's face was now crimson.

"Ah, then I received a wrong impression. I wonder, Vicar, whether you would permit me to have access to the church tower? I observed that it is crenellated, so presumably it has a flat roof. The view from the top must be a wide one."

"You wish to climb the tower? But it may be quite unsafe. I could not accept the responsibility. Besides, I perceive that you have an ulterior motive in making this request. What is it?"

"To be frank . . ."

"Oh? A phrase which I always mistrust."

"You are probably right. My ulterior motive is that I should very much like to have a look at the roof,

whether you will let us help to repair it or not.”

“I thought as much. Well, you would not see the roof, but only the tarpaulins—or would you like me to have them removed for your benefit?”

“Look, Mr. Winterbottom,” said Timothy, “I didn’t come here to cause you any agitation, and I certainly didn’t intend to antagonise you. After all, it won’t be all *your* money that my Society is proposing to spend! I do wish you’d allow me to explain the system on which we work.”

“Mr. Herring! If your Society were prepared to find every penny of the cost of re-roofing my church, I *still* would not accept their offer. I will not waste money on unnecessary outward show. You would be far better employed in collecting money for youth work than in throwing it away on useless and expensive projects such as the one you suggest.”

“Well, you are entitled to your opinion, of course,” said Timothy. “I am sorry to have wasted your time. My next move will be to appeal to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, pointing out that my Society is prepared, if necessary, to defray the whole cost of re-roofing the church with lead or tiles, whichever our surveyor deems the more suitable, and you will then be able to spend on your youth work the sum which, otherwise, would have to be paid for the corrugated iron and the labour costs of its installation.”

“Good day, sir! And please don’t pester me again.”

“Good day. Vicar, And, if you *should* change your mind, a telephone call to the *Nesting Pheasant* at Cranthorne Minster will find me ready and willing to re-open negotiations.”

Timothy walked back to Mrs. Stretton’s house, outside which he had left his car. She must have been watching for him, for she came to the gate as he approached it.

"Well, how did you get on?" she enquired. Timothy made a grimace.

"I didn't," he said. "It had never occurred to me that he would turn me down flat. He practically showed me the door."

"I did warn you. He won't spend money on anything but his youth work."

"Yes, I know. But it wouldn't be *his* money, you see. Look here, there are things I want to know. I am the original Elephant's Child. What about dining with me at the pub where I'm staying in Cranthorne Minster?"

"Good heavens! What next?"

"You wound me. I am clean, honest, and harmless."

"Yes, but . . . well, look, I've nothing to wear."

"My *dear* girl! At the *Nesting Pheasant* we like our ladies undressed."

"Very likely. But I wouldn't need to be undressed to ruin your reputation. It isn't fair to any man to let him be seen out with me."

"You intrigue me, you really do. Tell me more."

"No."

"Then dashed well go and wash your face and put your other shoes on, and come out and eat!"

"I'd love to, but . . ."

"Then kindly get a move on! I am not accustomed to be stood up by dames."

"I m not standing you up. Oh, well, don't say I didn't warn you!"

"My very words to His Reverence when I threatened him with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners."

"You never did!"

"Then I went to sleep in his study and dreamed up the entire interview. Go on up and put your hat on."

Half an hour later they were in the car.

"It's only half-past five," said Timothy, as they left the last cottage in Parsons Purity behind them. "How

would you like it if we drove around for a bit? They don't feed us at the pub until seven, if I read the notice correctly, and half an hour for a drink beforehand should be long enough, I think. What do you say?"

"Could we go to the top of the cliffs at Belling and look at the sea and the Merry Monarchs?"

"The Merry Monarchs being. . . ?"

"Some enormous limestone rocks at the end of Stewart's Point. I can navigate for you, if you'll give me the motoring map."

In twenty minutes they were on the cliff-top. Timothy pulled up. Except for giving him the necessary instructions for finding the way, his companion had said nothing during the journey. He took his hands from the wheel and offered her a cigarette. When he had lighted it for her, she said,

"Well, you wanted me to talk."

"Go ahead."

"I thought you wanted to ask me some questions. It's information you're after, isn't it—and not, perhaps, information about the church."

"Yes. Look, I don't want to spoil the evening before it's really begun. Let's leave it until after dinner."

"Oh, don't mind me! I'm pretty thick-skinned."

"Are you? I shouldn't have thought so."

"By the way, do I have to call you Mr. Herring all the evening?"

"I agree it's a damn silly name. What about Timothy?—unless you prefer Francis. I answer to both, also to Hi, or to any loud cry, but I like Timothy or, of course, Francis, better."

"Timothy, then. You know mine, don't you?"

"Well, you did put it at the end of your letter to us. May I use it?—or do I have to call you Mrs. Stretton all the evening? I must admit that I prefer Genista."

“Actually, it’s only plain Jane. Genista is my professional name—when I play in public, you know.”

“Jane is better still. Well, Jane, have you looked long enough at sky, sea and rocks?—because the pub, now I come to think of it, has only one table for two, and I should like to acquire it before anybody else bespeaks it. I sat at it for lunch, so I know it’s quite a good table, as tables go. And, as tables go, this one, if we don’t now get a move on, will get a move on, will have wented. Do you know the story of the little boy who was kept in after school?”

“I don’t think so. Tell me.”

“Well, this little fish always said and wrote ‘wented’ instead of ‘gone.’ After correcting him umpteen times, the teacher got browned off, and told him to write out fifty times, after school, ‘I have gone home.’ She toddled off to the staffroom while he got on writing this out, and when she thought he must have finished his lines, she trotted back to the classroom to let him go. She found the neatly written lesson on her desk, and beside it a little note: *Dear Teacher, I have done my lesson and have wented home.*”

Mrs. Stretton did not smile. She said,

“Nobody ever really learns anything in this world.”

“You distress me,” said Timothy, lightly, aware of bitterness in her voice.

“I wish you’d ask me those questions.”

“Curiosity killed the cat, you know, and I don’t want it to kill my evening, but, if you insist . . .’

“Yes, please. You see, I know they’re going to be beastly, and I want to get them over, and out of the way.”

“All right, then. After all, you don’t have to answer them if you don’t want to. I am about to stick my neck out good and proper. First, why will it harm my reputation—not that I’ve got one!—if I’m seen out with

you? Second, why did you let me think you played the organ at church services, when you know jolly well the vicar wouldn't let you? Third, why doesn't he come and chuck you out when you go and practise, as you did this afternoon? The vicarage is only just across the churchyard, so surely he must hear you?"

"I expect he called me a—well, didn't he?"

"Harlot was the actual term he used."

"Well, that answers your first question. As for the second one, if you understood me to mean that I played for church services, you misled yourself. All I said was that I didn't play to the glory of God. I thought that was putting it plainly enough. As for your third question, well, I've never found the answer to that. Of course he must hear me. He isn't deaf. All I can think is that he doesn't like to interfere because my family gave most of the money for the organ. We've always loved music, you see. Well, after that, all I can say is that I'm jolly well going to enjoy my evening."

"All right. No need to be defiant about it. Well, here we are, and, if you don't mind, I'm going to park you in the miserable little cubbyhole they call the lounge, bespeak that table for two—only hoping that some cloth-head hasn't beaten me to it—and organise some drinks, which I will bring into the lounge. There's only one bar, and I'm not sure that it's a suitable place for ladies."

"*Ladies!*" she repeated bitterly. Timothy turned the car in under an archway which led to the old coaching yard of the inn, and parked in one of the marked spaces.

"Look," he said, "I didn't like the vicar, and I do like you. You've obviously taken a pretty nasty knock at some time. When you know me a bit better, I wish you'd tell me about it. Troubles shared, you know."

“It wouldn’t halve mine. Nothing can. Please don’t bother about me. Come and show me this cosy little lounge and bring me a—what shall I have?”

“Well, I doubt whether they’ve got the ingredients for a champagne cocktail. What about sherry or a dry Martini?”

The inn did not run to coffee after meals, so, at eight o’clock, the meal over and the prospect of another *tête-à-tête* in the lounge (which possessed, as Timothy put it, its own smell) being uninviting, he drove her home. She thanked him at the gate in a charming but final manner, so any hope that he had entertained of being invited in entirely vanished. He saw that there was a light in a downstairs room, indicating that the *au pair* girl was at home, so he returned to the car and drove back to the *Nesting Pheasant*.

On the following morning a note was brought to him at the breakfast table by Bob, the barman, who also acted as the boots and the hall porter.

“Chap on a bike brought it over. Said it was important, so I thought you better ’ave it.”

“Thanks.” Thinking, with pleasant anticipation that it might be from Jane Stretton, possibly an invitation to lunch, he opened it. It was from the vicar. It read:

“Dear Mr. Herring,

I fear my remarks were precipitate and ill-advised. I have reconsidered them, therefore, and shall be happy to talk matters over at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely,
Wilfred St. John Winterbottom.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Progress

"I suppose the chap who brought this has gone?" said Timothy, folding up the missive.

"No, sir. I told him to hang about in case there was an answer."

"Oh, good! Tell him to say that I'll be there at half-past ten."

"You'll be there at half-past ten. Very good, sir."

"Now what on earth can account for this?" thought Timothy, as he attacked his ham and eggs. "My threat to approach the Ecclesiastical Commissioners? There's hardly been time for that to sink in, I should have thought. Besides, I don't think he believed me, and, anyway, he's such a fanatic, I believe he'd have seen it through. No, it isn't that. And I don't believe it's a real change of heart, either. Somebody has put the screw on the Reverend, and, as it isn't me, there's only one person it *can* be. What does she know, I wonder? Probably the same thing as I've guessed, but I can't prove it at present, and it doesn't really seem possible. Oh, well, we shall see what we shall see."

He finished his breakfast and went out to buy a paper. He smoked and read until ten, then he got out the car and drove to the vicarage. The vicar himself opened the door.

"Ah, Mr. Herring, come in, come in," he said, with a cordiality which, this time, seemed genuine.

"Thank you for your note," said Timothy.

"You may have been surprised to receive it. I have been thinking things over, Mr. Herring, and I fear I hardly gave you the chance to explain your errand. Perhaps you will allow me to ask you exactly what Mrs. Stretton wrote to your Society."

"She informed us that the lead from the church roof had been stolen, and that lack of funds prevented its replacement. She went on to say that you proposed to repair the roof with corrugated iron, and asked us to do something about it."

"I see. And you have come here . . ."

"Merely to make a preliminary survey with a view to writing a report. When my committee have considered this report, they will decide whether or not to offer financial assistance."

"You appeared to indicate yesterday that this assistance would certainly be forthcoming."

"I am quite sure it will. Of course, I should need to find out the amount, if any, which we could expect to obtain by private donation or public subscription before we made our own offer. Further, if our contribution had to be a substantial one, we should expect to choose the contractor who would carry out the work."

"Yes, yes, I see. Mr. Herring, I am in a dilemma. My main interest is in the young people of this parish, and to forward my work among them I need a good deal of money. This I received quite recently from an anonymous source. No conditions were laid down as to the use I should make of it, but I was requested to avoid any attempt to discover the identity of the sender. I need this money, Mr. Herring. I need it desperately if I am to carry out my plans. Surely you will agree that to place it at the service of youth is

more—infinately more—worthwhile than to hand it over to a rapacious contractor for the repair of the church roof? You see, I have been frank with you. I cannot agree to spend money on material things when I know of a much better use to which it can be put. And tell me this, Mr. Herring—why should Mrs. Stretton interest herself in the matter? She has no love for the church, none whatsoever. She is attempting to embarrass me, nothing else.”

“You mean she knows you have this money?”

“Oh, dear me, no! The business is none of hers!” said the vicar hastily. “I simply mean that, unless she wishes to embarrass me, I cannot see why she should have taken it upon herself to write to your Society.”

“I have no idea why she wrote, except that (like others, I have no doubt) she wants the job on the roof carried out in a fitting manner, that’s all. She may think well of the church as a building, you know, even if she has little respect for its work. I believe that the effigy in Dame Alice’s chapel is that of an ancestress of hers.”

“Oh, yes. Well, my dear Herring, if your Society is prepared to foot the bill . . .”

“I can make no firm promises on their behalf, of course, and, as I think I have indicated, I should need to find out whether there was any possibility of obtaining local contributions towards the cost of the lead or the tiles. Tiles would be quite in keeping, and might work out a good deal cheaper. They were extensively used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly the blue slate from Devonshire. By the way, I take it that the police know all about the theft of the lead?”

“Yes, yes. I reported it, of course. By the way, may I ask how long you think of staying down here?”

“If you will afford me facilities to inspect the roof, I shall go back tomorrow or the next day.”

"Could you make it Monday or, better still, Tuesday, do you think?"

"I could, of course, if it's necessary."

"Well, I thought perhaps I could give out a notice at Matins and Evensong about your Society's most generous suggestion, and ask for subscriptions, you know. Then, if you would be prepared to stay until, say, Tuesday morning, I could let you know the result of a meeting—a public meeting—at which I shall preside on Monday evening."

"Fair enough. All right, then. I'll stay until after I've seen you on Tuesday morning."

"Oh, good! Well, look, if the weather holds—for we dare not risk rain—I will have the tarpaulins removed and you shall ascend the tower if you are prepared to take the risk of its being unsafe. But please remember that I have warned you."

"How soon can you get the tarpaulins off?"

"As soon as my helpers have finished work for today. You may make your inspection tomorrow morning, if you choose."

"That's splendid! Right, I'll come along. Will about this time tomorrow suit you?"

He drove off, and, when he had parked the car at the *Nesting Pheasant*, he went into the bar. Old Elias Bagge was its only occupant except for Bob, the barman. Both greeted him, and the old man said,

"Well, I a'nt seen you in our old minster yet."

"No, I must certainly take a look at it before I go back to London."

"I'll be waitin' for ye."

"Right. Can I buy you a drink?"

"Ah, you can, too an' all, thank ye kindly. A pint o' bitter, if I may. There's no call for you to go sparrin' round they village churches when you got our old

minster at your back door. That's what I say. Waste o' time."

"Well, I've only seen one old church at present. I've been taking a look at Parsons Purity."

"Oh, ah? Thankee, Bob. Your very good 'ealth, sir. Parsons Purity, eh? They be a funny sort o' folk as lives there, and the parson, he be the funniest o' the lot, or so I hear tell."

"Oh, really? In what way?"

"I'd be 'ard put to it to tell ee that. Don't do to believe all you yurs. There be some as talks of witchcraft, and some as talks of devils, and loose oomen, and dee-consecration o' the church, and fairy rings in the grass round them there grave-stones."

"But you don't believe all that sort of old wives' stuff, do you?"

"It don't allus do to on-believe. Shakespeare knowed that. 'More things in 'eaven and earth,' 'e said, ah, and I reckon 'e were about right, too an' all. Well, I'll be off to me bit o' dinner. Thankee kindly for the beer, and don't ee forget our old minster. I'll be lookin' out fer ee."

After the old man's departure the bar began to fill up. The rose-fancier and the rock-garden expert drifted in, and so did the magistrate Manciple, Sir Ganymede's *bête noir*. They all exchanged nods with Timothy, and when Manciple seated himself at the long table, Timothy joined him. He wanted more than merely a nodding acquaintance with the magistrate, who, by reason of his office, must surely be well-informed on the subject of local affairs.

"I wonder," he said, "whether I could get a round of golf in these parts? I'm stuck here until Tuesday morning with nothing much to do for most of the time."

"Golf? Well, the nearest club is at Friars Frater, but it's ten miles off, I'm afraid."

“That wouldn’t matter. I’ve got my car. Should I be able to hire gear there? I was only expecting to be here until tomorrow morning, you see, so I didn’t bring my clubs.”

“Oh, I expect the pro can fix you up. What’s your handicap?”

“Only very moderate, I’m afraid.”

“Well, so is mine. I confess to—oh, well, don’t let’s bother about the shameful details. My car is in dock at the moment, so, if we both go, you’ll have to give me a lift.”

“Of course. Where shall I pick you up?”

“Oh, I’ll come here. What about tomorrow morning at about eleven?”

“You couldn’t manage this afternoon, I suppose? I’m going over to Parsons Purity tomorrow morning to take a look at the roof of the church. I’ve arranged with the vicar, so I’m afraid I can’t dodge it. It’s my job, you know.”

“What is?”

Timothy explained.

“So, you see, we can’t let him put corrugated iron on the roof. I’ve had the devil of a job to talk him round, but at last I’ve got him to the point of promising to get the tarpaulins off so that I can take a look from the top of the tower. I don’t want him to turn sticky on me again, so it would never do to stand him up now, just because I want to play golf,” he added, in conclusion.

“I suppose not. What’s Trogett got to say about all this? He’s come to think of the village, and all that therein is, as his private property, you know.”

“Trogett? Oh, the squire! I lunched at his table here yesterday, and gave him a lift home.”

“I bet he was full of his wrongs?”

“Well, he did say the Bench had taken his driving licence away.”

"I should dashed well think we did! He's lucky not to have been had up on a charge of manslaughter! He's killed one woman and seriously injured another, and run down a hiker and killed a dog. Except that the two women were proved to have contributed to the accident—there was a witness, fortunately for Troggett—I think there *would* have been a more serious charge. As it was, we brought it in as dangerous driving, and took his licence away for five years."

"Who was the witness?" asked Timothy, suspecting that he knew the answer.

"A Mrs. Stretton. Lives near him in Parsons Purity and is reported no better than she should be. Still, we couldn't shake her evidence, so he got off much more lightly than some of us thought he ought to have done."

"Where did the accidents take place?"

"The two women were run down here in the Square in Cranthorne. The hiker—he's just been discharged from hospital—was on the Mealberrow road, and Pimm's dog was outside Pimm's place at Parsons Purity. He's still pretty sore about it—that, and other things—Pimm is, I mean. He was in here yesterday, talking about rock gardens. Remember him?"

"Oh, yes. Sir Ganymede has a large rock garden, too, I believe."

"That's right. Enough said, I think, don't you? What are you going to have?"

"No, no. This is on me."

"Oh, well, a light ale, if I may."

"Any particular. . . ?"

"They only keep one kind of bottled beer here."

Timothy returned with the drinks and, as he set them down, Sir Ganymede came into the bar. He glanced round and then came over and stood with his back to the bar counter and glowered at Timothy.

“Morning, Troggett,” said Manciple.

“Gar!” said Sir Ganymede. “Like to talk to you, Herring, when you’ve got a moment.” He turned away and ordered a drink, hitched a stool towards himself with his foot and sat down heavily, obviously displeased.

“About this game of golf,” said Manciple. “I can’t fix it up today, I’m afraid, and you can’t manage tomorrow morning. What about tomorrow afternoon?”

“Fraid not. I expect to be writing up my report as soon as I’ve had a look at the church roof.”

“And I can’t do Sunday—promised to read the lessons at Matins in the morning, and my wife’s got people coming to tea in the afternoon. Looks as though we’ve had it. Never mind. I’m sure there will be somebody at the clubhouse who’ll give you a game. And now, what do you really want? Somehow, I don’t think it’s a game of golf.”

“Well, I would have preferred to talk out of doors. They say walls have ears.”

“Well, they’re probably right, although Bob is a discreet sort of fellow and there’s seldom any news in this town which isn’t common property before it gets discussed in the bar. Still, I’ll tell you what. If it won’t take too long—sorry, but I’ll have to leave in round about half an hour—let’s go over to the minster and use the archives room for a chat.”

“What about Elias Bagge? He’s lying in wait for me there.”

“That’s all right. He’ll be having his dinner about now, and I know where to find his keys.”

Bordering the stone-flagged path which led to the minster porch, the Queen Elizabeth roses made a brave and beautiful show. Manciple nipped off a bud and put it into his buttonhole. The facade of the minster showed two towers, one built over the crossing of the transepts

with the nave and chancel, the other, added a couple of centuries later, at the west end of the church.

Manciple led the way through the porch to the interior of the minster and the base of this tower. On the south wall of it there was an orrery clock constructed in the mid-fourteenth century. Hanging on a hook beneath the clock was the verger's gown which Bagge wore when he was on duty. From the same hook, but hidden by the gown, hung a couple of enormous iron keys. Manciple took them down and led the way up the centre aisle between its transitional Norman pillars, but, before he reached the screen, he branched off past the lectern and unlocked and went into a small room. From this, a flight of steps led to a wooden door richly ornamented with scrolls and spirals of ironwork in the form of a stylised growing and flowering plant.

"Nice work, isn't it?" said Manciple, pausing before inserting the second of the heavy keys. The door open, Timothy saw that it led to a small, square room in which were some glass cases bearing mediaeval tiles, fragments of sculpture, a small reliquary chest, and, on shelves around the room, chained books. To Timothy, to have examined these when he was accompanied by Elias Bagge and his learned-by-rote expositions would have been intolerable. Not to be able to do so now, owing to pressure of time, was equally, although differently, frustrating.

"Now, then," said Manciple, locking the door from the inside and glancing at his watch, "what's the trouble?"

"Well," said Timothy, "I came down here on what I should have thought was a simple errand. I belong to this Society I mentioned, which helps with grants of money to preserve historic buildings."

"Which Society is it? You didn't name it."

"Phisbe. Preservation of buildings of historic interest and what not."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of it. You stopped them taking down the fourteenth-century manor house at Candlewick to be shipped over piecemeal to America and re-erected to decorate the grounds of a motel."

"Yes. In the present case, I've been sent down to look at the parish church at Parsons Purity. Somebody wrote and told us that the lead had been stripped from the roof, and that the vicar proposes to repair it with corrugated iron. I thought, in my innocence, that I'd only got to go into the thing with the vicar, and pledge Phisbe's support, for him to clinch the deal. I should have set about finding out how much the parish was prepared to give towards the cost, and then, if all went well, I should have advised the Society to put the job into operation."

"But you stubbed your toe on Winterbottom?"

"Exactly. His point was that the money could be better spent."

"On his Youth Club, I expect. Of the cases of juvenile delinquency which come before the courts, an unduly high proportion are those of lads from Parsons Purity and some of the other villages from which Winterbottom draws his members. I don't know what his methods are, but they seem disastrous to me. Anyhow, I'm not surprised he stood you up. He has the name for being a fanatic."

"But that's not all. The letter of complaint we had was from a woman whom we took to be an elderly, rather hysterical spinster, and, of course, a devoted churchgoer. She turns out to be . . ."

"Jane Stretton."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, it's quite an ordinary sort of story, I suppose. She had an illegitimate baby. Her husband left her on

the strength of it, and the vicar preached a sermon for which, naturally enough, I suppose, she's never forgiven him."

"I see. I'd deduced something of the kind. You mean that she complained to us out of spite, not because she cared two straws about the church? It didn't strike me quite that way when I met her. She seems a most reasonable woman. I liked her."

"Oh, I'm sure she cares about the church, but solely as a building, you know. On the other hand, I'm also sure that if there's anything she can do to spite Winterbottom, she'll most certainly do it. Oil and water, you know. She's never forgiven him for that sermon, or the ostracism which followed it."

"Yes, but now comes the part which I don't at all understand. Having shown me the door when I told him why I'd come down here, the vicar now takes it all back, and sends me a most apologetic note offering to meet me again and talk things over. I went this morning. I was received in friendly fashion and offered not only every facility for inspecting the state of the roof, but a promise that the vicar will appeal from the pulpit for funds and will hold a public meeting to discuss the matter."

"Very satisfactory, I should have thought, although it doesn't sound much like Winterbottom's way of going about things. He's usually a pigheaded ass."

"That's what I thought. There must be an explanation. He doesn't strike me as the kind of man who thinks things over and decides that he was in the wrong."

"No, I agree. You know, it almost sounds to me as though somebody has put the screw on him."

"I wondered that myself. It's such a very complete change of front. Do you think Sir Ganymede Trogett may have a finger in the pie?"

"I should hardly think so. He's not keen on spending money on anything but his own place, I believe. But, look here, I don't think we've reached the crux of the matter, have we?"

"Well, a problem, as I see it, has arisen. My Society is always prepared to offer almost unlimited help if the cause warrants it, but we do expect that the people concerned will do what they can to help themselves."

"Indiscriminate charity is always a mistake. So?"

"So I have found out—he himself volunteered the information—that the vicar is in possession of a fairly considerable sum of money belonging, without doubt, to the parish, and which he is determined to spend on nothing but his youth work."

"Typical of him, of course."

"Yes, but Phisbe is going to take a pretty dim view of that."

"Well, the answer seems to me obvious. Tell your Society to steer clear. Let him go it alone."

"I can't. That's a lovely little church. It's well worth having a few hundreds spent on it. I can't stand the thought of giving it a corrugated iron roof. It would ruin it."

"I see."

"The vicar refers to an anonymous donor, but, to be frank, even at the risk of talking out of turn, I have a hunch that I know where the money came from."

"Yes," said Manciple. "Yes. I wouldn't put it past him."

He's got a single-track mind. Well, what are you going to do?"

"I want to find somebody who knows the truth, and can prove it."

"Well, I can tell you of one such person, but you'll never get him to blow the gaff."

"You mean Sir Ganymede?"

“No names, no packdrill, but, if you’re right, you see, he’ll have cut himself in on the deal. You don’t know him as I do. He is a man entirely without conscience. I wouldn’t be surprised if the proposal for the scheme to raise the money came from him, and he talked the vicar into it.”

“Can you offer me any advice, other than to abandon all offers of help from Phisbe? I’m dead against that, as I told you. On the other hand, I can’t let my Society in for footing the whole bill, now that I know this money is available.”

“I don’t think it *is* available. I’m certain that Peter has been robbed to pay Paul, but I don’t see what you can do about it. I happen to know that there is a debt of several hundreds on the new parish hall, which was built more as a headquarters for the Youth Club than for anything else. As for advice, I won’t venture to offer you that. You’ll have to dree your own weird, I’m afraid.”

“What happened to the illegitimate baby?”

“It was kidnapped, so to speak, by the man who ought to have been its father.”

“Ought to have been? Who *is* the father, then?”

“Oh, my dear Herring!”

“Oh, I see,” said Timothy. His companion unlocked the door.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I think I shall have to go now,” he said. “If anything interesting happens, do let me know. But advice—I seldom give that, even from my seat on the Bench. In this case, I have, as I say, none to offer.”

Timothy went back to the bar. Sir Ganymede was still there. He came over from where he had been seated on a stool at the end of the counter.

“I heard you’d seen Winterbottom,” he said. “How much would your Society be willing to fork out?”

"I have no idea. My job is to send in a report, then, if the discussion on it is sufficiently favourable, our surveyor comes down to see what needs to be done, and then, if my committee agrees, we ask for estimates."

"Oh, I see. Winterbottom tells me you want to climb the tower."

"Yes. He has promised to have the tarpaulins removed so that I can take a look—a sort of aerial view, as it were."

"Lucky if you don't break your neck! I know that tower! Mind if I come up with you?"

"Well, yes, I'm afraid I do. I can't do my job if other people are talking to me. It needs rather a lot of concentration, you see. I'm awfully sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Oh, no offence. Just that I like to see other fellows at work. Nothing much to do in a hole-and-corner place like Parsons Purity, that's all. But never mind."

"The vicar did hint that the tower might be none too safe, so you'll probably be better off on *terra firma*, anyway."

"It's those bells. What had Manciple to say for himself just now? You ought to be more careful of the company you keep, young feller."

"We were trying to fix up a round of golf—without success, I may add."

"Never play against him for money. Biggest twister out. And don't take his word for anything. I've known him take seven to get out of a nasty lie, and only chalk up three. And he's got a small fishing-net stashed away by every bit of occasional water in the county."

"Oh, come now!" protested Timothy, grinning.

"That feller's capable of anything! Staying here to lunch?"

“Yes—and I’d better go in.” Convinced that Sir Ganymede was on the point of suggesting himself as a luncheon guest, Timothy made off, but Sir Ganymede was not so easily defeated. He followed him out, and said to the waiter as they entered the dining-room.

“Same table as yesterday, William, eh?”

“Thank you, sir. I had already booked it to Number Three, as the gentleman is resident, so, if you’re joining him . . .” He turned a commiserating eye on Timothy.

“So you’ve got the better of Winterbottom,” said Sir Ganymede, picking up the menu. “Odd sort of fish, that feller. Ah, it’s paté day. They make it once a week here. Take my advice and order it. It’s a shilling extra, but it’s worth it. How did you manage to get round Winterbottom, eh?”

“By promising some fairly substantial financial help if he’ll agree to have the re-roofing done decently, and by threatening him with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners if he won’t.”

“You want to get hold of Frimley and King.”

“Who are they?—his lawyers?”

“No, his churchwardens. They’re the chaps—they and the Youth Club—who’ll be uncovering the roof for you.”

“How can they help me, apart from that?”

“Eh?—I’ll have the paté, William and the roast beef to follow. Have you still got a drinkable Burgundy in the cellar?”

“I believe I could find another bottle of the Nwee St. Georgies, sir—or there’s the Nurf—the Rhône wine.”

“Oh, yes, that comes cheaper. What do you say, Herring, my dear feller? Any preference? You’ll join me, won’t you?”

“With pleasure,” said Timothy. “The Châteauneuf, by all means. Thank you very much. And now, sir, what makes you suggest that I contact the churchwardens?”

“Well, for one thing, they’ll make sure the tower is safe, you know. Tell you what we’ll do. We’ll go along and watch them strip off the tarpaulins this evening, and then you can have a word with them. I know what time they have their tea. We’ll go along and watch them do it. Eh? What do you say about that?”

“I should think they’d manage just as well without us.”

“Nonsense, my dear chap! Why do you suppose they have foremen on a building site? If you want a job well done, and you can’t do it yourself, hang around and *watch*—watch, my dear feller! Gingers ’em up, eh? Makes ’em put their best foot forward, what? I saw those tarpaulins go on, and I intend to see those tarpaulins come off. So now, what about it?”

The waiter brought the wine and showed Sir Ganymede the label. He motioned the bottle away. The waiter, with an unobtrusive but eloquent glance at Timothy, again displayed the label. Timothy nodded, allowed himself to be out-manoeuvred, sipped the wine which the waiter put into his glass and nodded again.

Sir Ganymede, having passed the buck, grew expansive.

“Parsons Purity,” he said, forking up roast beef, horse-radish, baked potato, and greens, and then adding Yorkshire pudding, with difficulty, to the mouthful, “is a queerish kind of place.” He paused to eat. “Yes, a queerish kind of place. You’d be surprised.”

“I heard from the old chap who seems to act as custodian to the minster here that Parsons Purity is the haunt of witches, ghosts, goblins, and things that go bump in the night.”

“No, no, my dear feller! Nothing like that! That old lunatic will tell you any rubbish if you buy him a pint of bitter! I am referring to the *people* of Parsons Purity, to the *people*, my dear chap. Hi, William! Cheese and

biscuits. And open a fresh tin. The last biscuits I had here had weevils in 'em, dash it!"

"That, Sir Ganymede, sir, is a libellous remark on the 'ouse," said the waiter severely, "if you don't mind me pointing it out."

"A libel has to be written, man! Talking of scandal," Sir Ganymede added to Timothy, when the waiter had left them, "have you heard any rumours?"

"Rumours?"

"Yes, rumours. That Stretton woman, for instance."

"Mrs. Stretton is a friend of mine."

"Oh, is she, indeed? Well, let me warn you, young feller . . ."

"The vicar has already done that." Timothy knew better than to bring Manciple's name into the conversation.

"Never! The ungrateful bounder! You know, Herring, the cloth covers a multitude of sins."

"So far as I'm concerned, it covers only one sin in this case and at this moment."

"Ah, you mean this business of the church roof. But it's all in a good cause, my dear chap, all in a good cause."

"That depends on one's point of view. Personally, I'd ditch any number of Blackpool outings for young hoodlums to save one decent building from mutilation."

"Not the Christian standpoint, Herring. No, you're wrong-headed, very wrong-headed, to say a thing like that," observed the squire primly. "I should like another glass of your excellent wine, if I may."

Having thus boldly and calmly underlined his intention of leaving Timothy to pay for the wine, the baronet finished his meal in satisfied silence and then suggested that, if Timothy would drive him back to Parsons Purity, he would take him to the two churchwardens, introduce him, and leave him to make

his own impression on them. Uncertain to what extent his eccentric and self-sufficient companion was likely to be an acceptable go-between, Timothy saw no way, however, of avoiding the carrying out of this programme, and, disregarding a plain hint from a hopeful Sir Ganymede that brandy would suitably conclude the meal, he led the way out to his car.

They drove for a time without talking. Then Sir Ganymede said,

“You know, my dear chap, I’ve been thinking.” Timothy waited warily. “Yes, I’ve been thinking, dash it! Why shouldn’t you come and stay at my place while you do all this surveying? Delighted to have you. No need to tell you that. Housekeeper, Mrs. Prynne, also delighted to have you. What do you say? Couple of days?—three or four days?—just please yourself, what?”

“It’s very good of you, sir,” said Timothy, dismayed by an invitation which, he felt certain, had undefined but dangerous strings tied to it, “but it would be putting you to unnecessary trouble. I’m quite comfortable at the *Nesting Pheasant*, I assure you.”

“Ah, but you’re not on the spot. This surveying business needs you on the spot. Once those tarpaulins are off, you’ll need to watch events closely, very closely. I wouldn’t put it past some of the people here to indulge in a bit of sabotage, you know, yes, a bit of sabotage, damn it! Once those tarpaulins are off, there’ll be a free-for-all. I *know*, you know. I *know*.”

“Why, how do you mean, sir?”

The baronet snorted in a marked manner.

“Ever heard of wheels within wheels?” he asked. “There are *opinions* in the village about this business of the church roof. It’s become a kind of hub, don’t you know. Bad feeling on all sides. Typical. And this has

brought it to boiling point. Crystallised it, you might say. Heard of Martin Luther, haven't you?"

Timothy cautiously agreed that he had.

"But surely none of the village people are Lutherans, are they?" he asked, affecting innocence.

"No, no, my dear chap. You mistake my point. My favourite study is history—could have told that chap Hitler a thing or two. The point is this: would you see the Luther business as part of the Investiture Contest—Emperor against Pope, Pope against Emperor? Well, allowing that, what about the nobles, eh? What about them?"

"Oh, yes, I see what you mean."

"Of course you do. A lot of cloak and dagger hooligans, my dear fellow, and a mass of malingering malcontents. What do they say?—don't tell *me*. I'll tell *you*. They say, in effect, 'Which side is the Emperor going to take? Is he for this stinking fellow Luther, or is he going to stand by the Pope?—because, whichever it is, we're taking the opposite side. We'll *get* him somehow, one way or the other!'"

"You mean, then, that the village is ready and waiting to take sides about how the church is to be re-roofed?"

"Exactly. That's the position. A is against B for some fatheaded reason or other—probably a centuries-old family feud—and B hates C's guts because C did him down donkey's years ago over some deal or other—and C and A have never hit it off since C's hayricks caught fire ten years ago—and so on and so forth—and you can also count a half-dozen cranks and half-wits out on the side-lines, as it were, chucking bottles and half-bricks at all and sundry just for the hell of it. See what I mean?"

"Yes, but it seems incredible."

“Nothing incredible about it. It’s cold, sober fact. This business of the church roof has given ’em all just the opportunity they’ve been looking for. It’s a rallying point. It’s a fiery cross and a bloody banner. It’s the cat’s whiskers and the meat in the sandwich. I’ll go further. You will be *safer* under my roof than stuck out there in Cranthorne Minster, a lone wolf with the jackals all ready to pull you down!”

“Oh, now, look here!” said Timothy, beginning to laugh. “Why, except for yourself and Mrs. Stretton and the vicar, nobody knows what I’m here for!” Again he did not mention Manciple.

“That’s what *you* think!” said the squire of the village. “You don’t suppose that Stretton harpy is the only person, besides Winterbottom and myself, who knows she wrote to your Society? You’re known to have been to her house, too. You’re known to have taken her out and noshed her up—and *you* know what her reputation is in some quarters! If you don’t, it’s not for want of being told. Oh, well, here we are. Hi, Lizzie Hemsley! Lizzie! Open these damned gates!—or do you expect me to get down and open them myself!”

An old woman shambled out from the lodge at the wrought-iron gates of Sir Ganymede’s home and struggled to open them. Timothy left the car and went to her assistance.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said. “We allus used to keep ’em open assept at night-time, like, ’til the master put away his motor. He don’t only use the little side-gate now, so I never thought to listen for anybody comin’ in a car.”

“That’s all right,” said Timothy. “They’re a bit stiff for you, aren’t they?”

“Not when I haves fair warnin’ and can take it steady, sir, but the master’s that onpatient when you haves to keep ’im waiting.”

Timothy returned to the car and the fuming baronet. "What a way to receive you! By the way, while I think of it, don't cross swords with Mrs. Prynne." He laughed loudly. "She's a holy terror when she likes." He laughed again. "We won't trouble to garage the car, I think. You'll be wanting to chase back to Cranthorne when you've spoken to Frimley and King, and then back here with your night-shirt and toothbrush, what? Anyway, up to the house! Frimley may be at home, but King won't be finished work for some time yet. Mrs. Prynne will make us a cup of tea. Might find a spot of whisky to put in it, I shouldn't wonder, unless Castle, who's a thieving villain and a low-down slobbering skunk, has been at the decanter again."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Stranger Within the Gates

The interior of Troggett Hall gave Timothy some surprises, some shocks, and a good deal of pleasure. It was not a large house. A country gentleman's place rather than a nobleman's mansion, it was a squarely built pile whose only decorative effect, so far as the exterior was concerned, was produced by four bee-hive cupolas, one on each corner of the roof, each surmounted by what looked like a miniature bell-tower. The effect was slightly bizarre, but rather pleasing.

The front door opened into a spacious, well-proportioned hall, double the height of the other ground-floor rooms. It had a charming gallery at first-floor level. A broad stair, its wall hung with button foils, rapiers, dress swords, poniards, and sabres, led up to this. At the top, on the other side of the gallery, was a door to the library. Here, in another beautiful and beautifully kept room, the panelled walls were recessed to accommodate the books.

The largest recesses faced each other on the north and south walls, were arched at the top, and had narrow rectangular insets in either side. These also were filled with books. On the other two sides of the room, their continuity broken only on the west wall by a white and grey marble fireplace which was surmounted by a portrait in a heavily carved frame, the books

reached from floor level almost to the ceiling, which was decorated in the manner of William Kent. Timothy commented on this.

“Looks like William Kent,” he said, gazing up at it.

“The whole room is William Kent,” the baronet replied. “He came on here after he’d done Holkham. I don’t believe he was ever paid,” he added, in a tolerant, reminiscent tone. “But never mind him. This is what I wanted you to see.” He went over to a long, glass-covered table which occupied the middle of the room. It held a collection of antique silver. Sir Ganymede opened the lid.

Timothy knew a little about English silverware. He examined with great interest an Elizabethan beaker whose soldered-on foot-base was decorated with egg-and-dart Renaissance-type ornament, and whose rim, to a depth of an inch and a half, was engraved with a pattern of flowers and shields. Then he picked up, in turn, a lidded tankard of the same period or a little later, cylindrical, narrow, and tall; a two-handled chalice, obese, too heavy and too ornate for his taste, but a fine thing of its kind; tankards and wine-cups of the early and middle Stuart period; heavier specimens of Charles II and William III silver, and a collection of Queen Anne coffee and chocolate cups, besides mugs and two-handled cups of the early Georges. Timothy, with justification, praised this valuable collection of drinking vessels.

“Every one of them pinched, so far as I know,” said Sir Ganymede, in a tone of sombre satisfaction. “Not by me, of course. The only things I got away with were that rather valueless late-seventeenth-century pot when I was sent down from Oxford, and that Regency mug (which I don’t much like, anyway) that I half-inched from a shop in 1935. It was imperative that one added one’s quota to the family collection, you see,

however inadequate one's efforts. What we haven't got—and what I should really like—is a fourteenth-century cup like the one at King's Lynn. I've often thought of trying the Victoria and Albert, too—they've got the Studley Bowl, you know—and there's a magnificent fifteenth-century cup at Christ's College, Cambridge, but it seems hardly the thing to lift it, as one wasn't on the strength there. These affairs are hedged about with protocol, my dear chap, positively hedged about with protocol. You'd be surprised. Let's go into the kitchen and get Mrs. Prynne to make us a dish of tea, and after that I think we shall find Frimley and King at home."

Mrs. Prynne was a gargoyle, and not an amusing one. She was, in fact, repulsively ugly, mean-looking and sour-eyed, and as sparely and strongly built as an athletic man of thirty. She made the tea while they watched, and Sir Ganymede induced her (with difficulty, it seemed to Timothy) to allow them to have it in the drawing-room. This was a first-floor chamber situated between the library and the dining-room. The rooms on two sides of the gallery, Sir Ganymede observed, were bedrooms, one of which was at Timothy's disposal as soon as he cared to occupy it.

The more Timothy saw of the house, the better he liked it. He began to think that, after all, he would accept Sir Ganymede's offer of putting him up. Apart from its intrinsic beauty, and the harmony of its architecture and its furnishings, the house was beautifully kept, and, if the homemade bread and cakes which Mrs. Prynne brought in with the tea were a fair sample of her work, the baronet had an excellent cook. Mrs. Prynne sat down with the two men in the composed manner of one accustomed to doing the honours, and at half-past five Sir Ganymede announced that by now Frimley and King would be expecting them,

as he had sent his man Castle to put a note through each of their doors.

“We shall need your car,” he added. “Frimley lives out on the Barhampton road, and I’m dashed if I’m going to walk when there’s free transport handy. It’s for your sake, dash it, not mine, that we’re going in for this malarky.”

Timothy noticed, as they went out to the car, which had been left in the short front drive, that long ladders had already been placed in position against the walls of the church. He remarked that the vicar had wasted no time.

“Oh, that ain’t the vicar; that’s me,” the baronet told him. “The ladders are one of my little investments. Everybody knows I’ve got ’em, and there are a scale of fees. Oh, not to you, my dear chap! Wouldn’t dream of it—unless you like, of course. Half-a-crown a ladder an hour, and upwards according to the number of rungs. Step-ladders a shilling for twenty minutes. Let’s go.”

Directed by Sir Ganymede, Timothy drove to Frimley’s house. This proved to be a biggish, rather extraordinary-looking building situated about a mile from the church. It had no drive, the front door opening directly on to a country road which had been sufficiently widened to accommodate the buses. The house was painted in black and white, and consisted of a centre block three storeys high with a two-storey wing on either side. The windows, and an ogee arch on the front door, gave it the appearance of a presbytery, a pretence which was borne out by its stern, uncompromising, ecclesiastical colour scheme.

Sir Ganymede rang the bell and a severe-looking woman in a black dress and a white apron answered the door and surveyed the visitors with wary hostility.

“Good-evening, Bianca,” said Sir Ganymede. “Mr. Frimley in?”

"And expecting you. His auntie's with him."

"Get rid of her. We come upon no woman's matter."

Bianca (if that was indeed her name) eyed him with contempt.

"You know his auntie," she said, "and you know your way." She moved aside. Timothy followed Sir Ganymede halfway down a straight passage and in at a door which his guide flung open. A young man and an elderly woman were seated side by side at an old-fashioned bureau covered with papers.

"Oh, hullo, Troggett," said the man, showing no surprise. "Don't stop to knock!"

"I didn't," said Sir Ganymede, unnecessarily. "Church accounts? Miss Frimley, this is Herring."

"Good, but not red, I trust," said Miss Frimley. "Well, sit down, both of you. We've nearly finished."

"Good heavens, we've no time to waste while you frivel about," said Sir Ganymede. "Let's get down to brass tacks. Now, then, this business of the church roof. Herring represents some Society or other which is prepared to stand Sam, so what about it?"

"One moment," put in Timothy. "That is not quite correct. I have first to inspect the roof, then report to Phisbe . . ."

"Thisbe," said Miss Frimley.

"Pardon me—Phisbe, my Society. Then, if they accept my findings, we shall go into the question of ways and means. As I have explained to Sir Ganymede, we should expect—indeed, we should anticipate—that some of the cost would be met by the parish."

"Blood out of a stone," said Miss Frimley.

"Oh, come, now," said Timothy, smiling. "Phisbe helps those who help themselves, you know."

"Funny name for Providence, although both begin with P," said Miss Frimley. "Well, Godfrey, what have you to say?"

"I've left orders that Barnes and Collins are to get the tarpaulins off as soon as they've had their tea. King and Horace Pimm have promised to help. I suppose the ladders are there, Trogett? I had a word with old Battersby the other day. He's got his own ideas about the roof. I expect he will want to have a look at it when we've got it uncovered. He'll meet you round there, I dare say, if he feels equal to it. He is getting very frail nowadays, I fear."

"You coming along?"

"Of course he's coming. So am I," said Miss Frimley. "I suppose you're going now to see Bert King. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"No, no. Just had one. Sherry, if you've got some."

Miss Frimley motioned to her nephew to ring the bell. Instead of doing this, he went out of the room and returned, a little later, ushering in Bianca, a tray, a decanter, and five glasses.

"Bianca drinks with us," said Miss Frimley. Godfrey poured out the sherry. "You will all stand. We drink to the kingdom over the water."

"The kingdom over the water," murmured the company. "Bottoms up!" concluded Miss Frimley, draining her glass in a couple of gulps. "Now, Ganymede, off you go, and don't forget that I shall be on hand at the church watching your antics. Goodbye, my dear Mr. Red. We shall meet again. Until Philippi, then, fare you well."

"She's mad, as I expect you noticed," said Sir Ganymede gloomily, when he and Timothy drove off, "but Frimley has expectations there, although goodness knows when she'll ask for her cards. Sort of dreadful old woman who'll live forever, don't you know. Round here to the left. King lives at the other end of the village. Just as well. Don't want the churchwardens living in one another's pockets. They plot, you know."

Very secretive fellers, churchwardens. Nobody knows what they get up to in their spare time. You'd be surprised."

King did indeed live on the other side of the village. His was a cottage so far out of it that Timothy began to wonder, as they left houses and the church behind, and embarked upon a road which twisted, turned, switchbacked up and down, passed woods, and then ran alongside a river, whether the squire had forgotten their errand and was taking him on a conducted tour of the county. At last, however, they sighted semi-detached cottages roofed with thatch and having long, narrow front gardens filled with rioting flowers.

"Here we are," said Sir Ganymede. He marched up a flagstoned path and beat on the door with the toe of his boot. A young woman answered the unseemly tattoo, a girl of such flawless beauty that Timothy blinked incredulously.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You can't have it this week. He hasn't got it."

"Oh, I haven't come about the rent," said her landlord. "I know he hasn't got it. Count Boniface came unstitched."

"Yes, and *you* recommended it to him," retorted the girl. "He'll lay for you one of these dark nights if you go on leading him up the garden." She spoke with a kind of desperate amusement, and not in the least like a countrywoman.

"My dear girl, I backed the thing myself. I can't do more than follow my own tips. Anyway, where is he?"

"Where you told him to be—down at the church."

"We didn't pass him on the road."

"Seeing he went across the meadows, you wouldn't expect to, would you?"

"Did he make any comment?"

“Yes. He told me to tell you where you can go, and be damned to it.”

“Oh, I see. Ah, well, we’ll be getting along then, my dear.”

The girl slammed the door.

“What a very striking-looking young woman,” said Timothy, as they walked back to the car. “Is she King’s daughter?”

“No, mine,” replied the squire carelessly. “Pity King wasn’t in. I wanted a word with him before we teamed up with the others. Never mind. These things can’t be helped. Drive on, the way we’re pointing, and I’ll tell you where to turn.”

By the time they arrived at the church the tarpaulins were off, the ladders were lying along the path near the opening to the crypt, and supported by half-a-dozen youths (whom Timothy supposed were the vicar’s special flock) and, reinforced by the presence of Miss Frimley and Mrs. Prynne, several men were gathered at the south door. One of them, to Timothy’s surprise, was the rock-gardener Pimm, sworn enemy of Sir Ganymede. He nodded to Timothy, went into the church, and emerged with the vicar.

“Ah, there you are, Mr. Herring,” said Winterbottom. “Unfortunately old Mr. Battersby has gone to live with his married daughter, so we can no longer get his advice. Our friends here have severally ascended the tower, so I think it will be safe for you to do so, but pray exercise great care. Godfrey, my dear fellow, perhaps you would accompany Mr. Herring. The rest of us will await you down here. I suppose, Bert, you have secured the top ladder?”

“Depends what you means be that, sir.” Timothy eyed the second of the churchwardens with interest. He saw a tall, thin man of about forty, with blue eyes, a blond moustache, and noticeably large hands. The eyes

were good-natured and kind, and the whole figure gave an impression of lithe strength. "If you means have I fastened that there top ladder so as she won't pull away from the wall, the answer is bound to be *no, I 'aven't*, for the simple reason as there ent nawthen to make 'er fast to."

"Oh, I see."

"Gentleman can foller me up, sir, and then I can 'old on to she from the top," Bert King went on.

"Excellent. Well, good luck to you both, good luck! Oh, no, no, no! Wait a minute! You can't go up, Bert, my dear fellow. Two men only at a time, and Mr. Frimley is going. You know my rule."

"Very good, sir. It were only a thought, like."

"Come on, then, Mr. Herring," said Frimley, and they went into the church. "Do you care for me to go first? Perhaps I'd better, as I've been up before and know the ropes."

The door leading up to the bell-chamber was open. The ropes, referred to metaphorically by Frimley, existed also as inanimate but tangible objects which afforded a handrail on the left-hand side of the staircase opposite the newel-post on which the spiral turned. This rope tightened and slackened as the two men pulled on it, and at one point, about three-quarters of the way up to the bell-chamber, Timothy almost lost his footing in the grim darkness as one of the staples which pinned the rope in position came suddenly out of the wall.

Soon, however, he reached the bell-chamber and joined his companion. They looked at the bells and Frimley said,

"I suppose you've read *The Nine Tailors*?"

"Yes, of course."

"Do you really think the sound of the bells could kill a man?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"What do you think it does? Splits his ear drums?"

"I've no idea. Do we climb that ladder?"

"Yes. I'll go first again, shall I?" There was a trap-door above the bell-chamber. Frimley raised it, found another ladder and another trap-door, and then climbed on to the roof. Timothy followed, and walked to the parapet. Parsons Purity tower was not a very tall one, and, in any case, he had a good head for heights. He went to the crenellated wall and looked over on the west side. Then he crossed to the east to look at the uncovered roof of the church. He stood there for some time, notebook in hand, but he did not write anything. He made some rough sketches, but used his eyes much more than his pencil.

"Right," he said at last. "The light isn't much good. Will they put the tarpaulins on again?"

"The morning will do for that, after you've had a closer look. It won't rain tonight. You go down first. I'll hold the ladders from the top to steady them," said Frimley. "Incidentally, in spite of what Trogett and Winterbottom think, we're none the worse for being without old Battersby. He's a domineering, obstructive old fool, and they only wanted him because he would have backed them up about the corrugated iron."

"I see," said Timothy. "Incidentally, I think the tarpaulins ought to go on again tonight, you know."

"All right, I'll see Trogett and the vicar when we get down."

"Right." Timothy walked towards the first ladder. "Can you get the trap-door shut again?"

"Sure. Mind how you go."

Timothy was nearly half-way down when the ladder—a crazy contraption, in any case—swung away from the edge of the trap-door. He flung his weight forward, hitting his nose against one of the rungs, but he was a

well-built man and a passable gymnast, and his manoeuvre arrested the outward swing of the ladder. There was a yell from above his head.

“My fingers!”

Timothy scrambled down the last few rungs, stood back, and waited until Frimley joined him.

“Sorry,” he said. “The damn thing swung away from the wall.”

“I know. I tried to hold it, and then you did your monkey-on-a-stick act, and crushed my fingers.”

“I’ll have a look at them when we get down. Too dark here. Don’t touch the next ladder in case the same thing should happen. Better still, you go first. I’m a lot heavier than you, and can hold on while you get down.”

They arrived at the foot of the newel staircase to find the south door still open, but the porch and the churchyard were deserted. The men, the boys, and the two ladies had departed.

“So much for putting the tarpaulins back on again,” observed Frimley, sucking his fingers. “Can you give me a lift home?”

“Of course. Let’s take a look at that hand.”

“Oh, no, really. It’s quite all right. Just a bit bruised, I expect, that’s all. I’ll hold it under the tap when I get back.”

Timothy was in the dining-room at the *Nesting Pheasant* in time for a very late dinner.

“Almost given you up, sir,” said the waiter. “Saw you come in and go up to your room, and when you didn’t come straight down, we thought you meant to call it a day and ’ad gorn to bed.”

“I’ve been climbing towers, and got dirty. Had to take a bath.”

“Climbing towers, sir? The boiled chicken and mushrooms is off, sir. I’d have the cold roast beef if I

was you. French fried is off, too, sir, but the souffl ed potato is still on. That would be the tower at Parsons Purity, no doubt, sir? No, sir, there's nothink else, barrin' the beetroot, and that come out of a tin."

Timothy finished his dinner and went into the bar. Before he could ask for some whisky, the barman tendered an envelope.

"A lady left you a note, sir."

Timothy put the envelope into his jacket pocket, received his drink, and sat down at the long table in the only vacant place on the bench, but the crowded bar did not seem the best place in which to peruse something which he supposed might be of a confidential nature, especially as he found himself neighboured by Horace Pimm. He greeted Pimm reproachfully.

"You lot cleared off pretty quickly this evening, Mr. Pimm. When Mr. Frimley and I came down from the tower, there wasn't a soul about."

"You're right enough there," agreed Pimm. "I don't know about t'others, but, having stayed long enough to see fair play, as you might put it, I had to get back to have a look at my garden and come on here for a drink. How did you get on?"

"I had a very satisfactory look at the roof."

"Any trouble with the ladders?"

"No, not really. They seem rather apt to pull away from the wall at the top. They need to be replaced by something a bit more solid."

"Oh, you didn't try the long ladders tonight, then? What did you think of our bells?"

"I didn't notice them much. We just carried straight on up the ladder from the bell-chamber."

"We don't ring the bells no more."

"Oh? How's that, then?"

“Vicar’s afraid the sound will bring down the tower, and old Battersby, what affect to know, he agreed.”

“Oh, that’s nonsense! The tower’s as safe as houses.”

“Houses aren’t all that safe, Mr. Herring—particularly *big* houses.” He gave Timothy a look of such wide-eyed meaning that Timothy decided that alcohol was in process of doing its usual work. He finished his drink and went to the bar for another. When he got back with it, Pimm had gone. Timothy, not at all sorry about this, drank his whisky and went up to his room. He was emptying his trousers’ pockets in his usual methodical way, placing the various coins and keys and so forth on the dressing-table, when he remembered the envelope and went over to his jacket, which was hanging in the wardrobe, to get the missive. It read:

“Why not try old Badbury?” It was unsigned. Timothy threw it into the waste-paper basket, wrote the name *Badbury* in his notebook, and put a question mark after it. Then he had second thoughts. He picked the cryptic note out of the waste-paper basket and put it into his brief-case. He breakfasted next morning at eight, and, having finished his bacon and egg and poured himself a second cup of coffee, he caught the waiter’s eye.

“I’ve been recommended to try old Badbury,” he said. “Would the name mean anything to you?”

“Badbury? Did you say Badbury, sir?”

“Badbury is the name. Does it ring a bell?”

“Can’t say it does, sir, without you might be meaning Badbury Rings. Famous historic spot in Dorset, I believe, sir. A gentleman as was here was telling me about it. Roman roads and such.”

“I know all about Badbury Rings. This would appear to be a chap named Badbury. You don’t know of him?”

"Can't say I do, sir. Bob, in the bar, might know."

Timothy smoked his after-breakfast cigarette in the front entrance to the inn and then went up to his room. When he came down, ready to get the car, he met Bob in the hall and put the question to him.

"Badbury?" said Bob. "Seems to ring a bell. Badbury? Badbury? Tell you what. I'll ask in the bar when we're open. You going out, sir? Well, when you drop in for your usual, I'll likely be able to tell you."

"By the way," said Timothy, "was the lady who left the note the one I brought here for dinner the other night?"

"I never saw you here with a lady, sir." Timothy remembered that he himself had taken Mrs. Stretton's drink into the lounge. "This lady as brought the note was tallish, youngish, and had on a brightish-coloured little short coat in a kind of blue."

"I see," said Timothy, hoping, for their own sakes, that the police would never need to try to get Bob to describe a suspect. "Oh, well, it doesn't matter much." He went out to the car and drove to Parsons Purity. He parked on the grass verge and went inside the church. He stepped over to look at the font and then went to the door which led to the tower.

He climbed to the bell-chamber, conscious that there was something in the back of his mind and that it had to do with the staircase. Then he remembered. On his previous ascent, the rope handrail had pulled away from the wall with such suddenness that he had almost lost footing on the narrow, well-worn stone stair. This morning there had been no such *contretemps*.

"Something to do with there being two of us pulling on it," he thought, and would have dismissed the matter but for something much more significant. He climbed the ladder which reached from the bell-chamber, with its six bells, to the trap-door in the floor

above, pushed back the trap, and climbed into the room above the bells. This was lighted by a narrow window, so that it was possible for him to see at a glance that he would not be able to climb out on to the top of the tower. The second ladder, that which had pulled away from the wall as he had been coming down it on the previous evening, was lying in pieces on the floor.

"I suppose Frimley reported that it and the rope on the stairs were both unsafe," he thought. "Doesn't fit in with what usually happens over jobs of that sort. Much too prompt and efficient. Nobody in a village sees to that sort of thing over-night. Wonder who chopped it up like that?"

As he emerged from the south porch, he saw the vicar. Winterbottom waved to him and came to meet him.

"Up early, I see, Mr. Herring," he began. "Ready to begin work?"

"Well, I might be," said Timothy, "if I could get to the top of the tower without a ladder."

"My dear fellow! How do you mean?"

Timothy explained.

"I shall have to climb the long ones Sir Ganymede has lent," he concluded, "to take a close look at the roof from the top of the nave, but I thought I'd take another bird's-eye from the top of the tower first. Still, it doesn't really matter."

"You know, I thought I heard a noise. It would have been at about six o'clock this morning," said the vicar. "It may have been someone dealing destruction in the tower. Most extraordinary!"

"Somebody hauled off and got at it with a coal-hammer, I should think," said Timothy. "However, by the look of it, it was pretty rickety, anyway. Oh, well, I'll push over to the Hall and make arrangements with Sir

Ganymede, if you don't mind. By the way, do you know anything about a man called Badbury? *Old* Badbury, so far as my information goes."

"Old Badbury? My dear fellow, I fear somebody has been making a pleasantry at your expense. Were you advised to consult him?"

"The message was, *Why not try old Badbury*. Isn't there an old Badbury, then?"

"Oh, yes, there is an old Badbury, my dear Herring. Oh, dear! You *are* the stranger within our gates, are you not? Old Badbury is our local wizard. Harmless, I believe. Never comes to church, of course—my Youth Club lads don't like him. Still, boys will be boys, you know. One must expect a little rough horseplay from time to time. A healthy sign in the young, I always think."

"If they try any healthy horseplay on me, they'll soon wish they hadn't," said Timothy. "And, since he seems to be known as 'old Badbury,' shouldn't age and infirmity protect him? Not that it ever has, of course, from the time of the Mohocks onwards."

"Well, well," said the vicar, "I don't condone roughness, of course, but I suppose we must move with the times."

"Oh, yes—racial riots and discriminating landladies, anti-Semitism, apartheid, imprisonment without a trial, wild-cat strikes—we must certainly move with the times. Would you know of a youngish, tallish woman who sports a short blue coat?" Timothy abruptly enquired.

"A short blue coat?" repeated the vicar. "A *short* blue coat? I should think that might be Mrs. King."

"*Mrs.* King?" Timothy had a mental image of the beautiful girl whom Trogett had claimed as a daughter.

"Yes, indeed," said the vicar. "She would not have been married to a churchwarden had I been incumbent

at the time, of course. She is illegitimate, poor girl. Not that she can help it. One does realise that.”

CHAPTER SIX

Old Badbury

Whatever had been the intention of the person or persons who had destroyed the ladder in the tower, it made very little difference in the end. Timothy spent a strenuous and informative morning climbing up and down the long ladders contributed by Sir Ganymede, and at twelve o'clock he had sufficient evidence to warrant sending in a detailed report to his Society, coupled, he thought, with the suggestion that an extraordinary general meeting be called to discuss it, since, if the Society decided to take action, the work ought to be put in hand while the weather was good.

Bert King and John Hemsley stood about and helped to move the ladders when this was necessary. John was the grandson of the old woman who kept Sir Ganymede's lodge, and both men had been seconded to Timothy (at a price) by the squire, who turned up from time to time to inform himself of what was going on. The vicar, also, was a frequent visitor, offering fatuous advice and some criticism, and at half-past ten Miss Frimley came over with some cake and a thermos flask of tea.

The vicar was inclined to be peevish, as though he had repented of his change in attitude with regard to the roofing, but Timothy received his comments with exasperating levity. He liked Winterbottom no better

than he had when first they met. When the party had concluded the morning's work, he told his helpers that the tarpaulins had better go on again, and, unable to get rid of that incubus, Sir Ganymede, found himself obliged to drive back to the *Nesting Pheasant* with the baronet beside him. From Sir Ganymede's references to the inconvenience and loss to him from his having "lent"—Timothy grinned as the squire employed this ambiguous euphemism—two men to assist in Phisbe's researches, Timothy concluded that his companion was determined to cut himself in for a free lunch.

He parked the car and took Sir Ganymede into the bar. They established themselves on stools at the counter, their neighbours melting away as Timothy had seen them do on previous occasions when Sir Ganymede had graced the gathering with his presence, but, in spite of the privacy thus obtained, Sir Ganymede, downing pink gins in rapid succession, had nothing to say. It was not until they were seated at table that he asked:

"Made your mind up?"

"About the roof?" asked Timothy.

"No, no. I thought that was all settled. About coming to stay at the Hall."

"Well, it's very kind of you, but as soon as I've written my report, which I shall do this afternoon, I have to get back to London." He had made the clumsy excuse before he remembered his promise to the vicar to stay until Tuesday.

"Please yourself, of course, but, you mark my words, as soon as you've gone, Winterbottom will be up to his tricks," said Sir Ganymede darkly.

"How do you mean?"

"I've known Winterbottom for years. Very obstinate, awkward sort of feller."

“But he’s quite agreeable now to giving up his corrugated iron.”

“Don’t you be too sure of that. Hey! William! I want another sausage with this roast chicken, dash it! What do you do at this benighted hole? Starve the customers to death and then pinch their wallets, dammit?”

“Coming up, sir,” said the waiter.

“What I mean,” went on the baronet, watching jealously as another sausage and another roast potato were put on to his plate, “is that Winterbottom is cagey. Soon as your back is turned, you mark my words, he’ll reverse all decisions and take his own line.”

“He’s agreed to make an appeal to his congregation for funds.”

“Then why on earth not stay the night at my place, go to church tomorrow, and make sure he does it?”

There seemed no way of escaping the invitation, so Timothy accepted it, pledged himself to appear at Trogett Hall in time for dinner and, having given the squire a double brandy, saw him off at just after half-past two. He packed his bags and paid his bill, then went to find Bob to tip him. The bar was closed by the time he left, but Bob was in the room behind the bar getting outside a pork pie and a pint. Timothy tipped and thanked him, and was about to shoulder his way out with his baggage when Bob said,

“I didn’t want to talk in front of customers and Sir Ganymede when you was in before lunch, sir, on account of I didn’t know what your business with old Badbury might be, seeing the note was brought by a lady, sir, and by the fact, when I put about a feeler or two, as the old party does not seem over-popular in these parts. The fact is, sir, old Badbury’s a foreigner.”

“A foreigner?”

“Not a foreigner from foreign parts, sir. An English foreigner, and therefore, as you might say, not liked

hereabouts.”

“Oh, you mean he comes from another county? How long has he lived around here, then?”

“A matter of twenty year.”

“And hasn’t been assimilated yet? Oh, well, that’s only to be expected, I suppose. Did you discover where he hangs out?”

“Ah, I did that. He’ve got a cottage in Parsons Purity village, well out, next door to somebody called King, on Bishops Lane. Don’t ask me where it is, ’cos I haven’t a clue, but I daresay there’s folks in Parsons Purity as can direct you the way.”

“Thanks very much, Bob.” He went out to his car, dumped his luggage, and then sat in the driver’s seat to write out his report in rough. He still needed to have some idea of whether the village was prepared to subscribe towards the cost of repairing the church roof, and there was no point in making a clear copy until he had some information, however meagre it might be, on this point.

The afternoon was warm. Even the rough report was long and detailed. From time to time he took the late R. G. H. Fellowby’s writings out of his brief-case, which lay beside him on the front seat, and compared Fellowby’s impressions with his own. He wound down the windows of the car as far as they would go, took off his jacket, slung it over the back of the passenger seat and went on working. At four o’clock he put away his ball-point, pushed his rough report, with its recommendations, into his brief-case, wound up the windows, and left the car while he went to get some tea. The *Nesting Pheasant* did not serve teas, but there was a restaurant in a street leading out of the square, and it seemed stupid to take the car such an inconsiderable distance, particularly as he might not

find parking space in the square itself, and it was forbidden to leave a car in the narrow street.

He treated himself to whole-meal scones with strawberry jam and clotted cream, drank three cups of tea, and returned to the car. He put on his jacket, patting it automatically to make certain that he had his notecase with him, and wound down the driver's window. If old Badbury had not returned from work—supposing that he still worked—it would be quite pleasant to sit outside his cottage in the car and wait for him. As Timothy thought of this, another thought followed immediately. It was Saturday afternoon. Old Badbury would almost certainly be at home.

He was at home and was watering his garden when Timothy arrived. Moreover, he was being helped to do this by his neighbours, Bert King and the beautiful woman, illegitimate daughter of Sir Ganymede and, as Timothy now knew, Bert's wife. Timothy got out of the car and stood at the front gate of the cottage. The old man was wielding a large watering-can, while his helpers appeared in turn from somewhere at the rear of the premises with buckets of water as refills. The sight of all this co-operation pleased Timothy. At least it proved that, however unpopular old Badbury might be in the village, he was not completely friendless and was not a recluse.

It was Mrs. King who saw Timothy first. She had just emptied a bucketful of water into the can when she glanced towards the gate.

"Hullo, there!" she called out. "Come right in, stranger!"

The form of the greeting, and the pseudo-American accent, irritated and, at the same time, interested Timothy. They disclosed the fact that she was nervous, he thought. On the other hand, they seemed to deride her almost incredible beauty.

“‘Out spake the queen of faerie, out of a bush of broom,’” he responded gallantly. To his astonishment, she capped and concluded the quotation by adding, in her ordinary voice, as she came to the gate.

“‘She that hath gotten young Tam Lin, hath gotten a stately groom.’”

“Well, well, well!” said Timothy. “Thank you for your note. You see that I decided to fall in with your suggestion.”

“I’m glad you did,” she said simply; but her eyes gave a second meaning to his remark and to her own reply. He smiled at her as she unlatched the gate and bade him come in. She took him along the path as her husband came round the side of the cottage with another bucket of water. He greeted Timothy cordially and shook him by the hand.

“Hey, Ben!” he called out. “Here’s Mr. Herring come to see you.”

Old Badbury put down the watering-can and wiped his hands on his trousers. As soon as he spoke there was no doubt about his place of origin.

“Why, bor,” he said, extending a large hand, “I hare yew hev in mind to roof aar oold charch.”

“That’s right,” said Timothy. “Pleased to meet you, Mr. Badbury. I’ve been told you’re the man to come to for advice.”

“Thatchen, that do requaar.”

“Thatching? Well, now, that *is* an idea. But who would we get to do it?”

“Young Tom Bingley and me. That roof is sadla, bor. She ’on’t carry much more life if parson get his way.”

“We shall need to carry out some repairs to the rafters before the new roof is put on. I’m with you there. Whatever we use to top them, the rafters will have to be seen to. Did the tarpaulins get put on again, Mr. King?”

"Ah, they did, too an' all. Young Godfrey Frimley and the vicar come and give us a hand. Vicar's lads were quick enough to help drag 'em off of a Friday night, but they weren't a-giving up Sat'day arternoon. Can't say as I blames 'em. You're on'y young once, and Sat'day mid-day's pay-day for 'em, so they're orf on their motor-bikes with their girls up be'ind, soon as they've 'ad their dinner."

"So, if we decide to thatch the roof—I shall have to ask the vicar and the parish council about that, of course—you think you and young What's His Name could do the job, do you, Mr. Badbury?"

"Think? *I know*. Don't yew pay noo more regard to Vicar. That hev the mote in his eye. Fare to me, bor, Vicar, that doont mind if the charch fall down, soo long as that doont fall on his own head."

"Well, I'm much obliged to you for your suggestion, Mr. Badbury, and I'll certainly bear it in mind. Where can I find Tom Bingley?"

"That sing in the quaar."

"Oh, all right. I shall be at church tomorrow morning. I'll speak to him after the service."

He took leave of the three of them, and Mrs. King accompanied him to the gate.

"It isn't true old Badbury's a wizard," she said.

"No, I could see that."

"It's just wicked village talk, because he doesn't speak the same as they do. But I like the way he says things, and at least he doesn't drop his aitches."

"Norfolk people don't."

"I doubt whether the vicar will let the church roof be thatched, but it might be worth trying. It would come a lot cheaper than lead."

"Is it old Badbury the vicar will object to, or the thatch itself?"

"Both, I expect."

“Yes,” said Timothy, thoughtfully. “Oh, well!” He went back to the car, but she accompanied him.

“It isn’t true he’s a wizard,” she repeated, “but sometimes I think he must have second sight. I told him I’d written to you and he said you’d need to run away fast when you left Parsons Purity for the last time, because two women would be after your life in two different ways. Well, I’m not one of them, but I did hear—oh, well, never mind.”

Timothy drove back to the church. The tarpaulins were on again, and Sir Ganymede’s ladders had gone. Leaving the car where it was, he went into the churchyard and crossed it by the path which led to the vicarage. He might as well canvass the opinion of the vicar at once, he thought. It would give a talking-point at dinner with Sir Ganymede. The afternoon was still sunny, although the sun had begun to decline. He looked at his watch and decided that there was plenty of time. He could always break off a protracted conversation by pleading the squire’s invitation to dinner.

As he passed the low and narrow priest’s-door which led to the vestry, Jane Stretton came out.

“Hullo,” she said.

“Hullo. Been organising?” he asked, in what he felt, immediately, was an unnecessarily ironic tone.

“If you mean to enquire whether I have been playing the organ, the answer is no,” she replied, standing squarely in his path and giving him a very direct look. “If you really want to know, I’ve been organising some flowers for tomorrow’s services.”

“Really?” He was astounded. “But I thought . . .”

“You thought correctly. I am not on the rota of the Women’s League of Help and Friendship. I said I had been organising *some* flowers, not *the* flowers. Do you understand the difference—do you understand *me*?”

"I understand you well enough to believe you're up to some devilment," said Timothy, grinning. "What exactly *have* you been a-doing of?"

"Well, I'll tell you one thing I did, with Trudi's help. Last night she and I climbed the tower and smashed that rickety, unsafe ladder that leads to the open top where the parapet is."

"You and Trudi?"

"Don't look so shocked. It's quite all right. Trudi's an atheist. She's also as strong as a horse."

"No, but I mean—why?"

"So that you shouldn't go up to the top of the tower again, of course."

"What was the tremendous thought behind that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just decided I didn't want you to, that's all. I hear you're dining and staying the night at the Hall. Well, lock your bedroom door. Promise me you will."

"You know, you're having a rush of blood to the head," said Timothy, shaking his own and speaking mock-seriously. "Take a couple of aspirins and have a nice lay down, as I've heard it called."

"And you," she retorted, "be mamma's good little boy for once, and do as you're told. You'll live to thank me." She walked past him. He watched her until she had left the churchyard and was hidden by some fine yew trees which grew by the churchyard wall, then he went on his way to the vicarage. A maid opened the door.

"Yes, sir, he's in," she said, before Timothy could make the enquiry. "He's expecting you. He said you was to be showed into the study directly you come."

The vicar again appeared to have shed his inimical attitude.

"Ah, my dear fellow!" he exclaimed. "I was hoping to see you. I understand that you are to be a near

neighbour of mine.”

“Sir Ganymede has kindly offered to put me up for the night. Then I shall attend morning service and, after your meeting on Monday and your assessment of it on Tuesday, I shall take myself back to London and hand in my report.”

“So soon? I had hoped you would be staying among us longer, although I know you mentioned Tuesday morning.”

“Nice of you to say so. I’ve come to tell you of my findings and to put a suggestion to you. May I come to the point?”

“Of course, of course. Do sit down. I have my sermons ready for the morrow. In the morning I shall preach to the text from John two, seventeen: *The zeal of Thy house hath eaten me up*. The zeal, you know, my dear Herring. *That* should have some bearing upon our enterprise. Do you not think so?”

“I do indeed,” said Timothy. “Do you propose to add anything of a more secular nature?”

“In what sense, my dear fellow?”

“I was thinking of a direct appeal for funds when you give out the notices, perhaps.”

“I see. In the evening I shall preach on: *to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof*. Ezra nine, nine.”

“Most apt, if I may say so,” said Timothy. “Well, we shall need all the help we can get, so I hope your people will be inspired to do their bit. The fact is, Vicar, a close inspection of the roof convinces me that there will have to be a quite substantial sum spent upon repairing the timbers before we can think about the weather-proofing.”

“I still think corrugated iron would sufficiently protect the timbers without the necessity for repairing them as well.”

"When we remove the wagon-roof . . ."

"The wagon-roof?"

"The barrel-roof, if you prefer it."

"But—do you refer to the ceiling?"

"I do. Please let me finish. When we remove the ceiling, I am pretty sure we shall find that the death-watch beetle has had a go at the principal rafters, and I wouldn't be surprised to find dry-rot in some of the other timbers. Of course, I'm not an expert. It would be for our surveyor to say, but I've had a pretty close look, as you know, and that's my opinion, for what it's worth. Even if you *do* use corrugated iron for the roofing—although I do hope you won't—you'll still be faced by this far greater problem of the rafters."

"But—death-watch beetle! Dry-rot! That could cost hundreds of pounds to put right!"

"Well, Vicar," said Timothy gently, "unless you want the thing falling on your head, the money will have to be found. But now for my proposition. I have just come from an interview with Mr. Badbury."

"Oh, now, really, my dear fellow!"

"Just a minute! He made what I think may be a very helpful suggestion, but I don't propose to act on it without your approval."

"I am hardly likely to approve of any scheme which that idolatrous old man has put forward."

"The cost of lead, or of tiling," said Timothy firmly, "is fairly high, but to use corrugated iron, as you propose to do, although ever so much cheaper, would be sacrilege." He looked at the vicar, but Winterbottom made no protest about the use of the word. "Mr. Badbury's suggestion, therefore, is that we have the roof thatched."

"*Thatched?* You must be joking!"

"Not at all. Thatch was in common use during the early Middle Ages, and was used, most likely, when

your church was first built.”

“But the danger of fire!”

“Is negligible. There are no houses near enough for sparks to fly from neighbouring chimneys. Both the vicarage and the Hall are out of range, and there is no other building even remotely contiguous to the church. Moreover, I already have this one volunteer to do the job, and he knows of another man who has the necessary experience. I don’t think they would charge very much for their skill and labour. Apart from that, there would be nothing to pay for, except the rods and the reeds.”

“Reeds?”

“My volunteer is familiar only with reed thatch, I fancy.”

“Mr. Herring, all I can say is that I would not allow him to work on my church if he offered me a thousand pounds for the privilege. I do not wish to be stiff-necked or uncharitable but I could not allow him access to the church roof. He does not come to church.”

“I should have thought that to allow him to work on the church roof might put that right, you know. I believe he’s a real craftsman, and such chaps like to do a good job.”

“I will not allow him to touch the roof of my church. In any case, the idea of thatching is ridiculous.”

“There are thatched cottages in the village,” said Timothy, “but it’s up to you, of course. I thought it might be worthwhile to mention the old chap, and what he’s willing to do.”

“Yes, yes, of course. But I am afraid I must be firm over this. A thatched roof is quite out of the question. I could not possibly agree to such a solution.”

“Right. I’ll be off, then. Sir Ganymede will be expecting me.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Night at Troggett Hall

The gates, this time, were open. This, Timothy surmised, was in anticipation of his arrival. He drove up to the front door and did not need to knock or ring. Sir Ganymede was there to greet him.

"My dear chap, come in, come in. This is delightful. Leave your bags. They will be taken care of. Let me show you to your room, then you must come straight down, and we'll have a stirrup cup before we move off, eh? That's to say, before we dress for dinner."

Prattling genially, the baronet made his way from the hall to the gallery, closely followed by Timothy.

"I trust no ladies will be at dinner," said Timothy. "I haven't brought dress clothes."

"Nobody but Mrs. Prynne," said Sir Ganymede. "Well, here we are." He opened a white-painted door. "The Uncanny Room we call it. Just a joke, you know, but if the name unnerves you, we can always make a switch. I'll leave you to sort yourself out. Bathroom's round the next bend, but don't stop now. That stirrup cup is waiting."

Timothy had not been told where this would be, so he went down to the hall. It was empty, so he went up the stairs again and tried the library, the only room with which, so far, he was at all familiar. The library also was empty; so, to his surprise, was the case which

had contained the priceless collection of antique silver. He loitered by the window for a minute or two, but nobody came, so he decided that the most sensible plan would be to return to his bedroom and wait to be summoned. Having regained his room, he closed the door and saw that his suitcase and briefcase had been brought up. Before he had time to do more than notice this, the door opened and Sir Ganymede put his head in and informed Timothy that the drinks were in the drawing-room and awaited him there.

“Not a word to Prynne that I’ve put you in this room. She’d have a fit,” he said. “Well, come along, if you’re ready.”

He hurried away, and, by the time Timothy joined him, Sir Ganymede was standing at a small Chippendale table in front of one of the tall windows.

“Ah, here you are,” he said. “I always drink whisky before I dress for dinner. Same for you? Splendid! Here, say ‘when,’ but don’t say it too soon. Lots of fine drinks been ruined because decent fellers felt bound to say ‘when’ too soon. Makes for bad feeling, my dear feller. Experienced it myself. Simply shocking, and very disappointing, to feel you’ve got to say the word inches before you really want to.”

Timothy refused a second drink and at the same time the dressing-bell went. He returned to his room and went along to the bathroom to find out whether the water was hot enough for a bath. There was no hot water, so he took a cold plunge and went back to his room to put on the lounge suit in which he had travelled from London. There would be a gong to announce dinner, Sir Ganymede had told him, so, having made himself as presentable as his limited wardrobe allowed, he seated himself in an armchair by the side of the four-poster bed and picked up his briefcase.

He did not take out its contents immediately, but sat gazing through the window at the prospect, or as much of it as he could see from where he sat. The length of the drive, the width of the road, and a stretch of the churchyard separated him from the church itself. The evening was quite light enough for him to be able to see that some activity was going on out there, but he could do no more than guess at its nature. The probability, he thought, was that a ladder was being installed in place of the one which Jane Stretton and Trudi had jettisoned. He had been speculating upon their motive in doing this. That it had been in the interests of his own safety he found it difficult to believe. He began to open the brief-case, which he had been holding on his knee, but before he could take out his notes to glance through them, the gong sounded.

Dinner was as good a meal as he had expected. Mrs. Prynn brought in each course, sat down with the two men to eat it, collected the plates, and came in again with the next selection of dishes. It was, in this respect, like a suburban party when the mistress of the house does not keep a maid.

The table was a long one. Sir Ganymede sat at the head of it, with Timothy on his right, and Mrs. Prynn sat at the foot, opposite her employer. Conversation with her would have been difficult, therefore, in any case, but was rendered more so by the fact that, whenever Timothy ventured to make a remark to her, she kept her gaze strictly on her plate, and replied in such cold and fruitless monosyllables that, by the end of the fish course, he thought he would give up the attempt to include her. When she had retired with the fish plates, Sir Ganymede, casting an eye on the door, said:

“Don’t bother with her. She don’t talk at meal-times. The only word she really knows is *touché*, and I

bet she didn't need to say *that* very often. Well, what mischief have you been up to this afternoon since I left you? I heard you went to see old Badbury and then you spoke to the vicar. You didn't get much change out of either of 'em, I wouldn't mind betting."

"I received a sensible suggestion from Badbury, as a matter of fact. Unfortunately the vicar won't consider it. Badbury thinks the church ought to be thatched."

"Thatched? You'll never get anybody here to go into it if old Badbury is involved. As well have the devil put the roof on! Better, perhaps. Plenty of people have a fellow-feeling for the devil, no doubt, but they'd like to see old Badbury burnt at the stake."

"But why? He seems a decent, sane old chap, and he and a chap named Bingham would do the job at workman's wages."

"Lay off it," said Sir Ganymede seriously. "If you let that roof be thatched by old Badbury you'll have the church set alight, and I don't mean maybe, and I don't mean metaphorically."

"Would you yourself oppose the idea?"

"No, I like to see a good bit of thatching, but you can take it that I'm about the only person here, with the possible exception of Jane Stretton, who wouldn't be dead set against the idea. If you don't believe me, you attend the parish meeting on Monday night. That'll show you. Here, let me top up your glass. How d'you like this claret?" Timothy praised it, and with justice. It was a beautiful wine. "All smuggled," said the squire, in tones of great satisfaction. "You shall try the brandy after dinner."

Timothy was reminded of the empty show-case in the library.

"I see you've locked away your silver," he remarked.

“Always do, when I have anybody staying in the house,” explained Sir Ganymede. “Easy come, easy go, you know, and I could tell you were a connoisseur.”

This bare-faced insult had to be taken in one of two ways. Timothy decided to take it as a joke.

“Yes, you never know, you know, do you?” he said. “Light-fingered Larry is my name with the wide boys.” He and the squire sampled the brandy when the meal was over and Mrs. Prynne had brought in the coffee, and then Timothy pleaded that he had his report to finish. He added that he could not really complete it until he had found out whether the parish would be prepared to make a contribution, however small, towards the cost of the repairs, but that he supposed he could write off the suggestion that the roof should be thatched.

“Yes, indeed. Rats!” exclaimed Mrs. Prynne, with venom.

“The library, my dear feller, is at your service,” said the baronet. “Mind if I join you? Promise to be as quiet as the proverbial mouse. Stupid sort of saying. Don’t think mice are quiet at all. Scrabble, scrabble, scutter, scutter, squeak, squeak! Dashing irritating little animals, if you ask me.”

“I thought my room . . . ,” began Timothy; then he saw the disappointment in his host’s face.

“Don’t get much company except Prynne,” said Sir Ganymede, eyeing his housekeeper with loathing. She returned the look with one of pure malevolence, and, swallowing the last of the brandy in her glass, gave them an abrupt goodnight and took herself off in eloquent and dignified silence.

“Oh, the library, by all means,” said Timothy. “I’ll just pop up and get my brief-case.” He went to the window. The lodge-keeper—ah, she’s getting some help with those gates.”

“Poor old Lizzie!” said the squire. “She’s never been the same since John Hemsley’s birth, you know. His mother, her only daughter, died of it. Pity! Wouldn’t have had it happen for the world, but one can’t foresee these things.”

Timothy, deciding that John Hemsley’s birth might better be a matter for neither question nor comment where he was concerned, went off to get his brief-case and returned to join Sir Ganymede in the library. A bright fire was burning and a little of the antique silver was back in the glass-topped case. The baronet occupied an armchair at the fireside. Timothy seated himself and opened his brief-case. It contained nothing but his three printed books.

“Hullo!” he said. Sir Ganymede looked up.

“Something you want, my dear feller?”

“No, no, it’s all right,” said Timothy; but it was not all right. His notebook, the late Fellowby’s report, Mrs. Stretton’s letter, and the note from Mrs. King were all missing. He bent to his work, but, before reconstructing his report, for which he would have to depend upon his (fortunately excellent) memory, he made a list of the possible occasions on which his brief-case could have been rifled. Then he drew out his wallet and examined the contents. His money had not been touched.

“It ain’t all right, though, is it?” asked the baronet. “What’s up?”

“Only that I’ve mislaid one or two bits and pieces. Now what can I have done with them? Let’s see.” He began to jot down some hasty notes.

“Brief-case presumably intact on arrival at *Nesting Pheasant* on Thursday. Brief-case left in bedroom for rest of day. Nobody at pub with any interest in contents, so far as I know. Only possible suspects are the vicar, but came nowhere near pub, and Mrs. Stretton, but under my eye all the time she was at

Nesting Pheasant except for less than five minutes while I went to bar to get drinks to take into lounge. Unthinkable she touched brief-case, (a) Not enough time to investigate contents (b) did not know then what my room number was (c) I had not then received note from Mrs. King, and that is one of the missing items.

"Friday. Only likely suspects Manciple and Sir Ganymede. M. could have seen me put Mrs. King's note in my pocket and could have found out my room number from waiter or the office. *N.B.* Ask both. *But* I had notebook in my possession next day to make rough draft of report on church roof. Sir G. probably full of curiosity, but cannot believe anybody knowing him would have allowed him to sneak upstairs. He does know room number, though, because I gave it at lunch to waiter. But I'm certain he would have swiped brief-case, contents and all, not removed items from it.

"Saturday. Much the best opportunity. I was at Parsons Purity all morning, leaving brief-case at hotel. Field wide open. *But* left my key at office. *N.B.* Ask whether anybody could have borrowed it. Chambermaid has pass-keys to all rooms, but only reason for rifling case would be dishonesty. No possible interest in notebook and letters and Fellowby's report *unless* bribed by someone to get hold of them. I don't believe this. Leaves it, so far as I can see, that investigation and theft have taken place since I've been here at Hall. *N.B.* Just remembered I left all baggage in unlocked car while I went to have tea before leaving *Nesting Pheasant*. Damned careless. Besides, throws the thing wide open if brief-case rifled then. However, point is—who on earth is interested in the stuff that's been taken? Has all the earmarks of being a blind to cover up something else. *But what?"*

Timothy looked up from these jottings to find Sir Ganymede's eye on him.

"I'm sure there's something wrong, Herring, old feller," said the squire. "You look like the *Wreck of the Hesperus*. You know: 'The boy stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled. My blasted feet are bleedin' hot, there's something up, he said.' Out with it, my boy! Dinner disagreed with you?"

"It's really not important," said Timothy. "The fact is, I seem to have mislaid the notebook I thought I had in my brief-case." He decided not to mention the letters.

"Put it in a drawer in your room when you unpacked, I expect. Always doing the same sort of thing myself. Head like a sieve, my dear feller. Head like a sieve."

"Well, I can go up and have a look," said Timothy, "but I certainly don't remember doing anything of the sort. There would have been no reason for it, you see."

"Left it behind at the pub, then. We're on the tinkle here. Give 'em a ring, my dear chap. Telephone's in the hall downstairs."

Timothy nodded and went out of the room, closing the door behind him with some care. He had no intention of telephoning the *Nesting Pheasant*. When he made contact with the inn it would be a personal interview, face to face with the management, so, instead of going downstairs, he went along to his bedroom, pulled open the drawers of the dressing table and looked into the wardrobe. There was no helpful result, so he returned to the library.

"Made your call? Any luck?" asked his host. There was something in his tone which made Timothy suspect a trap. It caused him to think it unwise to lie.

"No, to both questions," he replied. "I don't think there would be any point in ringing up the *Nesting Pheasant*, so I adopted your suggestion and had a look round my room. Nothing doing."

“Knew you hadn’t rung up,” said Sir Ganymede, grinning. “Got a listen-in in the bookcase. Always like to know what people talk about on the tinkle when they’re in my house. Glad you didn’t lie about ‘phoning. Can’t stand duplicity.”

Timothy grunted, and then asked,

“Can you let me have a few sheets of notepaper?”

“Help yourself, my dear feller. Plenty in that table drawer. Take as much as you need.”

“Thanks.” A long silence followed while Timothy roughed out his report, concluding it with the words: “The parishioners have decided . . .” What they decided was partly to be tomorrow’s business, and a result, more particularly, of Monday evening’s meeting.

“Well,” said Sir Ganymede, when his guest had folded the written sheets and put them and his ball-point away, “what say we have a night-cap, and then I’ll toddle off to bed? No need for you to follow suit unless you like. Liberty Hall, you know.”

“I think I’ll turn in, too,” said Timothy, when Mrs. Prynne had brought in a decanter, a siphon, and three glasses.

“Well, cheers!” said the squire, when the glasses were charged. “Sweet dreams! Hope you’ll find your bed comfortable. Sure that bed’s been properly aired, Prynne?”

“The beds in this house are always aired,” said Mrs. Prynne. “Well, gentlemen, I’ll bid you goodnight.”

“Odd sort of woman,” said Sir Ganymede reflectively. “Used to be some sort of gym instructress at some sort of girls’ school. Got too old for it, I suppose. Strenuous sort of life for a woman. Still keeps herself pretty fit, though. You’d be surprised. Volting, and the acrobatic lunge—all those sort of old-fashioned capers, you know.”

“Vaulting?” queried Timothy, unable to visualise Mrs. Prynn in the execution of this activity.

“No, no, volting, my dear chap. Often wondered whether *re-volting* comes from the same game, you know. Interesting study, etymology. Well, I’m off. Hope you don’t walk in your sleep. All zombies, sleepwalkers.”

Timothy found his bed both wide and comfortable. All the same, it took him some time to get to sleep. Before he lay down, he had taken out his wallet and counted his money again. None of it was missing. Whoever had rifled his brief-case had been no ordinary thief. When he had left the car unlocked while he had his tea, the bulging notecase must have been obvious enough in the breast-pocket of the jacket he had left slung over the back of the seat.

At last he slept, but he thought afterwards that he must have been troubled in his mind, even in sleep, for at about two in the morning he found himself as wide awake as though he had not been to sleep at all. He concluded that some out-of-the-ordinary noise had roused him. He had a subconscious feeling that he had heard a thud.

The Hall did not run to the luxury of bedhead lights, as he had realised when he discovered that it was necessary to switch off the light at the door and then grope his way to the bed some twenty feet away. This time, forgetfully, he felt for the usual dangling string overhead, remembered that it did not exist in that large and ominously named room, and then thought of the ghost. He chuckled.

As he did so a shape loomed up from the floor beside the bed. Automatically, Timothy, who had propped himself up on his right elbow, brought his left fist round. The blow, from this position, was a feeble one, but it connected with a button which hurt him, and

the connection elicited a gasp which, whoever it came from, certainly did not emanate from a ghost. The force with which he had attempted the punch rolled Timothy over the edge of the bed as his right elbow slid from the pillow, and, in a flash, the assailant had reached the door.

Timothy recovered his balance and flung himself out of bed, but by the time he had found the light-switch and was out on the gallery, the visitor had disappeared. Except for the light from his room, the house was pitch dark. It was also eerily silent. Timothy stood listening, but there was not a sound to be heard, nothing of footsteps running, nothing of doors being opened or shut, not even the sound of wind, rain, or the ticking of a clock. There was only one thing pounding in his ears—the beating of his own heart.

He had no idea where to find a switch to light up the gallery and did not propose to try to find one. He had neither torch nor matches, and his cigarette lighter would scarcely be effective, he thought. After standing there a minute or two, he realised that he was in a very draughty spot, so he went back into the bedroom and closed the door. He had not been provided with a key, so he carried the small bedside table over and placed it so that, if anybody effected an entrance, the moving of the table would make enough noise, he hoped, to wake him. As he turned from the operation to straighten the tumbled bedclothes, he saw the knife. It was lying lengthwise in a fold of the eiderdown. He picked it up by the blade, and recognised it as a Commando dagger which was one of the trophies which he had seen hanging on the staircase wall.

He stood at the bedside, balancing the dangerous little weapon between finger and thumb. So far, he had been startled; now he was angry. He put on a dressing-gown and, instead of slippers, his stout country walking

shoes. Then he put the small table back in its usual place, and, leaving the bedroom light on and retaining possession of the knife, he went out on to the gallery and groped his way along with one hand on the gallery wall.

By the time he reached the corner, he found that his eyes had become sufficiently attuned to the darkness to allow him to make his way without bumping into any of the occasional pieces of antique furniture with which the gallery was adorned. At the top of the stairs which led down to the hall he found a switch, and, in an instant, had flooded the staircase with light.

He looked at the staircase wall, but could not immediately remember where the Commando knife should have hung. Just as he spotted the inconspicuous loop, painted to match the wall, which had held the knife—for none of the weapons had sheaths—a voice behind him asked,

“What on earth are you up to, my dear feller? Do you walk in yer sleep or what?”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sermons in Stones

After the shock he had already received from his early-morning visitor, this sudden voice from the rear shook Timothy. He swung round, knife in hand. The baronet recoiled.

"You *do* walk in yer sleep!" he said accusingly. "What yer doing with that perishing thing? Put it back!"

"I was just going to," said Timothy, recovering. "I found it on my bed."

"Found it on yer bed? Oh, come, now!"

"All right. So I walked in my sleep and took this beastly thing off the wall here, and went and dropped it on my bed and punched myself in the stomach, and hurt my knuckles. That made me come to, so I got out of bed again and came along here to put the thing back. Is that the way you see it?"

"All except that you punched yerself in the stomach," replied Sir Ganymede, dubiously. "Fellers don't punch themselves in the stomach. Sure it was in the stomach?" he added keenly.

"Well, I struck on a button, that's all I know, and as I never wear a pyjama jacket, it's hard to make out how I did strike on a button unless the button was on somebody else's clothes. No, honestly, somebody did come into my room a few minutes ago, and he did leave this knife behind him."

"All right, if you say so," agreed the baronet in a soothing tone which irritated his hearer almost beyond bearing. "Let's say no more about it. What about a drink, and then back to beddy-o, what?"

"I could do with a drink," said Timothy, for this was the simple truth. He took a searching look at his companion, but the squire was wearing a bathrobe of terry towelling held together by a broad belt of the same material. Sir Ganymede laughed.

"Looking for a crushed button?" he asked. "Never mind. Come on. You'll have forgotten all about it by the morning."

Privately thinking that this was one of the unlikeliest prophecies he had ever encountered, Timothy went downstairs with his host. The decanter, the siphon, and two of the glasses were where they had been left the night before. Mrs. Prynne, Timothy remembered, had taken her own out, half-full.

The baronet, after asking the rhetorical question of whether Timothy minded an unwashed glass, poured out drinks. It was as they were halfway through the second one that Sir Ganymede suddenly asked,

"Man or woman, would you say?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Yer visitor. Was it a man or a woman?"

"I don't know. All I remember is that something woke me up—a door being slammed, I think—and then this thing loomed up and I hit it."

"No scream?"

"No scream, just a thick sort of grunt. I couldn't get any real force behind the punch, so I don't suppose I did any damage except to my knuckles."

"Rummy sort of affair. Wonder whether Prynne had designs on you? You didn't let on I'd given you the Uncanny Room, did yer? Anyway, I bet it was Prynne, the old—!"

“She would hardly have brought a knife with her,” said Timothy austerely. He looked accusingly at his host. “You talked about my walking in my sleep. I suppose you don’t, by any chance, walk in yours?”

“Eh? Good heavens, no! Why should I? Swaller yer drink, my dear feller, and let’s get back to bed. It’s cold in here.” He was right, in that the fire was out, but Timothy found the room warm enough and was unwilling to go back to his room. He felt wide awake, and was prepared to spend what remained of the night in speculation upon its events. However, he followed his host upstairs, switched on the light in his room, closed the door, and dressed himself. He had no intention of going back to bed. A far better idea, he thought, was to go for a walk as soon as the sun began to rise.

He left the house and set out aimlessly, intent only upon exercise of body and mind. Walking was exhilarating in the cool, fresh air of the early morning, and soon he had left the village and was in a winding lane which was bordered by high hedges. It crossed a main road some two miles out, and continued as a bridle path across a moor covered in heather and low-growing gorse.

He soon gave up the fruitless mental struggle to determine the identity of his visitor of the early hours. It must have been Sir Ganymede, Mrs. Prynne, or the almost invisible man-servant. The bridle path rose to a ridge whereon stood a solitary pine tree guarding a disc barrow. He paused at the top of the ridge and looked about him. The sun was up and a ground-mist had begun to rise from the dew on the heather. Far off to the south-east was a line of hills. Between them and where he stood lay an arm of the almost landlocked bay. He looked at his watch and decided that it was time to turn back. He did not know at what time Sir

Ganymede liked to breakfast, but fancied that he might be an early riser. Another path, one which crossed the one he had taken, seemed to promise a way home without the necessity of retracing his steps. He took it, and, after a brisk walk of forty minutes, he came out upon a road which he recognised. It led to the village from Cranthorne Minster.

As he passed the church he heard the sound of the organ. He paused, and then went inside. At the foot of the stair which led to the tower was a brass vase containing flowers—wild flowers, he supposed, from their smallness and comparative insignificance. He picked up the vase and carried it out to the porch. The flowers were the dull purple inflorescences of *Atropa belladonna*, the deadly nightshade.

Timothy whistled. He returned the vase to its place and went along to the organ loft to listen to the ending of Bach's *Prelude and Fugue in C Major*. Then he spoke.

"Good morning. I wish I could have heard the whole of that."

"You? What on earth are you doing here at this time in the morning?" cried Jane Stretton.

"Come along out, and I'll tell you."

"Yes, we'd better go, or we shall dead-heat with Mr. Winterbottom for early service."

They left the church by the priest's-door and walked towards her house.

"What was the idea of the deadly nightshade?" asked Timothy. "I take it you were the instigator."

"I don't know why you should think that."

"Come, now, don't hedge. I know it was you. You mentioned doing some flowers. Remember? Anyway, thanks for the warning, but it came a bit late in the day."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing." He wished he had not spoken. "Just one of those things, and, like some other things in this extraordinary place, it might have made sense, but it doesn't."

"What other things?"

Timothy told her about the apparently pointless thefts from his brief-case.

"I can't think what on earth the bloke was after," he concluded. "I'd left a wallet, a fairly fat one, in my jacket, but that wasn't touched."

"Was there anything in the way of speculation in your notes?"

"Speculation?"

"Speculation as to what had happened to the lead off the church roof. Suspicions. Possible identity of the thieves. All that kind of thing."

"Oh, I see. No, nothing of that sort. I look upon that as the business of the police."

"Were there any personal remarks about the people here? Your opinion of us and our goings-on?"

"I don't think so. You mean that somebody purloined and read my stuff, hoping to put two and two together and make five of it?"

"Something of the sort, I suppose. The whole thing is extremely odd. Was there anything in your brief-case which one might call cryptic?"

Timothy remembered the note.

"Only a reference, in an unidentified hand, to old Badbury," he said, not mentioning that he knew the note had come from Mrs. King.

"Oh, *was* there? That might be a clue, then. By the way, which room did you sleep in last night?"

"The one Sir Ganymede calls the Uncanny Room."

"But that's his *own* room! I—well, I know that for a fact. Tim, I don't like the way some things are turning

out. I don't want to lose you, but I wish you'd go back to London."

"Well, I shall be gone the day after tomorrow."

"That may be too late. Can't you accept that you've been warned? Look, what good can you do here? You don't know what the vicar is like. If he's made up his mind to roof the church with corrugated iron, that's the way it will be."

"If you're so sure of that, why did you write us that letter? But for that, Phisbe wouldn't have known anything about the vicar and his loathsome corrugated iron."

"I suppose I thought at first there was just a hope. I know now that there wasn't. Well, goodbye for the present. I expect I shall see you again before you go."

Breakfast was on the table, and Sir Ganymede in testy humour, when Timothy got back.

"Where on earth have you been?" he demanded, when Timothy, changed and shaved, having failed to find his host in the dining-room, had come into the kitchen. "Thought you'd been spirited away. Here, tell Prynne about your murderer. She always thinks that room is haunted."

"I don't think. I know," said Mrs. Prynne, collecting porridge plates from the kitchen table, "and I only wish you'd had the sense to tell me that you'd changed the room. There are bacon and eggs, kidneys, sausages, black puddings, fried bread, mushrooms, fried tomatoes, cold ham, potted meat, omelettes, kippers—any or all of it. Mr. Herring will be hungry after his walk. A walk always makes a gentleman sharp set."

"You're loquacious, Prynne," said Sir Ganymede. Timothy, too, was as astonished by the length of her recital as he was delighted with the length and variety of the menu. He wondered why Sir Ganymede cadged lunches and drinks at the pub, when he could get such

excellent meals at home, but supposed that this was due to meanness, the common human foible of desiring something for nothing, coupled with a wish to be quit of Mrs. Prynn's rather funereal society for a bit.

When breakfast was over, the two men smoked in the library while Timothy looked over the re-written report, so far as it went, and Sir Ganymede studied the last issue of the local paper.

"Sunday papers don't turn up until eleven or later. Have to read them after church," he said, tossing aside the journal. "Anything interesting in that report of yours?"

"You may read the new draft if you like," said Timothy. "There's nothing secret about it. That's why I can't think why anybody wanted to make away with the first draft. They must have thought there was something in it which they needed to know. There certainly wasn't."

"Can't stand reading other people's writing. Spit it out, won't yer? Anything for a change. I read this bally rag from cover to cover yesterday."

"I've merely reported upon the general condition of the church, the state of the roof, the suggestion that it might be thatched . . ."

"I guessed all that. What else have you put in?"

"Nothing. I've added a note to indicate that it's highly improbable that the idea of thatching will prove popular, and I've left room at the end to report upon the effect of the vicar's appeals today, and the result, if any, of the parish meeting tomorrow."

"That woman Stretton played the organ again this morning, didn't she? I'm sure I heard her. Wind's this way."

"Yes. I went in and spoke to her."

"Tell her about yer murderer?"

"I mentioned that somebody seemed to want to have a look at my notes and so forth, that's all."

"What she have to say to that, eh?"

"Oh—nothing helpful."

"I bet she told you to go home, didn't she, now?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, she did."

"I suppose you wouldn't consider taking me with you? Plenty of room in that car of yours—Humber, ain't it—and I've got to see my lawyer. Pay for half the petrol and cut you in for lunch on the way. Be company for you, what?"

"I shall have to leave first thing on Tuesday morning."

"That'll be all right. Pryne can get breakfast for seven sharp and we can be off by half-past eight. That suit you?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Timothy, inwardly cursing his luck at being saddled with this unwelcome passenger, but seeing no way out. "Whereabouts in London do you want to go?"

"Oh, drop me off anywhere that's convenient, so long as it's east of the Albert Hall. I don't want to put you to any trouble. Wonder what Pryne is giving us for lunch? Always have the main meal mid-day on Sundays. She likes to go out on her own in the evening." He got up and prowled from bookshelf to bookshelf. Timothy put away his report and went over to the window.

"I think I'll go out again for a bit," he said. "Then I'll go straight into church." He went out of the room as quickly as was compatible with good manners, afraid that the baronet would suggest himself as his companion on the walk, but Sir Ganymede merely grunted and did not so much as turn his head. Reasonably certain of what he would say when he got there, Timothy took the road which led to the semi-

detached cottages occupied respectively by the Kings and the Norfolk thatcher.

It was a pleasant walk and a long one. He did not hurry. He reached the cottages at about a quarter to ten and leaned on the old man's gate. Then he heard the sound of the pump and went to the back. The wizard was sluicing himself, and Mrs. King was operating the pump handle.

"Hullo, there!" said Timothy. The manipulator withheld service. Old Badbury straightened up and wrung water from his beard and moustaches. Mrs. King handed him a coarse striped towel. "I've come to tell you that the vicar will have none of the thatching, and to thank you for the offer. I can't budge him, I'm afraid. I'm very sorry, because I think, myself, it was a very good idea," Timothy went on.

"Soo it was," agreed old Badbury, wiping moisture out of his ears. "But that occasion me no surprise, he woon't hoold with it."

"No, he seems an obstinate, wrong-headed sort of party. Anyway, there it is. Are you coming to church this morning, Mrs. King?"

The beautiful woman laughed.

"Me?" she said. "Oh, no, I never go to church on Sunday mornings. I've Sunday dinner to cook. Ben has it with us, don't you, Ben?"

"Ah, and I doon't hev a fancy to goo to charch, neither, since thoose young devils rough me up," said the old man. "One or two of them remember the taste of my thumb-stick all the same, I reckon," he added, with a dark chuckle.

"Well, I have to attend," said Timothy. "The vicar is going to appeal for contributions, and I want to hear how he does it, so I'll say cheerio."

"I fare to think it might be best not to worry about the thatching," said old Badbury. "If that charch barn

down any time . . .”

“They’ll think you ill-wished the place,” said Mrs. King, “and how right you are, Ben. Goodbye, Mr. Herring—unless you’ll be at Evensong.”

“I may be. I’ll see what this morning brings forth.” He did not hurry back, but loitered, and looked around him and, at last, seated himself on a bench outside a small pub to smoke a couple of cigarettes, regretting that the place was not open so that he could get some beer. So leisurely was his progress that the church bells began to ring before he reached the lych-gate.

He slipped into a seat at the back of the nave, disregarding violent signals from Sir Ganymede in the manorial pew, bowed his head conventionally for a moment or so, and then leaned back and stared up at the ceiling. Somebody slipped some books on to the ledge in front of him. It was King, who smiled and bade him a whispered good morning. Timothy smiled back, picked up the prayer-book, and, as always on the infrequent occasions when he found himself in church, read the marriage service. He wondered how often it was used in Parsons Purity, and whether Jane Stretton had been married in church or at a registrar’s office.

His thoughts were interrupted by the organ, which broke out into a raucous voluntary. The vicar and his procession came in, everybody stood up, and then the service began. It was a typical occasion, reverent, badly sung and with the lessons clearly and pointedly read, the general confession and prayers impressively and darkly muttered by the sparse congregation as though they were incantations, and the psalms left almost entirely to the choir, which consisted of four little boys, three men, and about a dozen young women capped and gowned like female members of a university.

At last came the notices. The vicar gave them out, his resonant voice lending drama to the items, and then he paused, surveyed the gathering, and said, "Now we come to the visitor in our midst." All eyes were immediately turned on Timothy, who preserved a wooden expression until the eyes reverted to their former fixation on the vicar. "We have been blessed," went on Mr. Winterbottom impressively, "by an offer of help with a project which, I am sure, is dear to all our hearts, the re-roofing of our beloved church. As you know, I had thought, in my ignorance, that so long as the fabric of this wonderful old building was preserved intact, the nature of that protection could be of the humblest and the least expensive procurable. It has been suggested to me that I was wrong. Beauty, it seems, is only skin-deep, after all. Money which could, and should, be devoted to a higher purpose, must be spent on re-roofing the church in what Mr. Herring"—the heads turned round again—"and the Society which he represents, consider to be fitting. It is my duty, therefore, to inform you that a public meeting will be held in the church hall at half-past seven tomorrow evening to canvass the matter and to decide upon what proportion of the cost of the work shall be borne by the parish, and how much Mr. Herring's no doubt learned and, we trust, affluent Society will be prepared to find towards the large debt which we shall inevitably have to face. Hymn number three hundred and eleven, to the tune *Pembroke*, during which the offertory will be taken. '*The world's great age begins anew, the golden years return, the earth doth like a snake renew her winter weeds outworn.*' Not one of Shelley's more exquisite lyrics, perhaps, but germane, I think, to our purpose. I am aware that there are those among us who do not care for the change from *Hymns Ancient and Modern* to *Songs of Praise*, but I hope,

nevertheless, that they will join in with a full heart. We will leave out the second stanza, as the words are meaningless to those unacquainted with the geography of Greece and her legends, and, in any case, are not easy for everybody to pronounce, so, as we have only two stanzas to sing, perhaps the organist will kindly give us the air straight through twice, while the sidesmen begin their (we hope) fruitful pilgrimage, after which we shall all join in. Hymn number three hundred and eleven."

Timothy knew neither the words nor the tune, and while choir and congregation did their best with *Pembroke* and Shelley, he scanned the second stanza, interested to find out with what the rustic congregation was considered unfitted to cope. He read:

*"A brighter Hellas rears its mountains
From waves serener far;
A new Penëus rolls his fountains
Against the morning star.
Where fairer Tempèes bloom, there sleep
Young Cyclads on a sunnier deep."*

Timothy put his half-crown into the discreet velvet bag on the end of the brass rod which was held out to him, and reflected on Wordsworth's *We Are Seven* and one or two regrettable lapses by John Keats.

After the collection came the sermon. The vicar gave out his text: "*The zeal of Thy house hath eaten me up,*" and went on to place upon it his own interpretation. Taken in conjunction with his wording of the notice calling for the parish meeting, this amounted to a justification of his own plan for re-roofing the church with the cheapest of materials, and a condemnation of Phisbe and all its works.

“The emphasis today,” declared Mr. Winterbottom, “is on youth, and rightly so. Bricks and mortar, stone and slate, wood and concrete, iron and steel, can never compete, in the sight of God and man, with bone and muscle, brains and brawn, eyes to be opened, ears to be unstopped. *‘Except the Lord keep the city, they labour in vain that build it. Except the Lord keep the house, the watchman waiteth but in vain.’* What of those who sold doves, who changed money, in the great temple at Jerusalem? They did these things—so they said—maybe as they thought—to the glory of God and to worship Him, but what did it all amount to? To profitable chaffering, not to the glory of God, but to the enrichment of the house of Mammon.”

Timothy leaned back in his seat. As a sermon it was fair to average. As a death-blow to his mission it was mortal, he thought. But, when he left the church at the conclusion of the service, he was undeceived.

“A very nice sermon, sir,” said Bert King. “I reckon vicar gave us a fair bellyful for a Sunday morning. There’ll be fine attendance tomorrow at the church hall to hear what you gentlemen from London plan to do for us.”

“I shouldn’t think a meeting will be necessary,” said Timothy. “It seems that the vicar knocked my Society for six.”

“Oh, come, now, Mr. Herring! I thought Vicar spoke up fine for you. They textes now! Enough to lay out old Satan for good and all.”

“But all that stuff about brains and brawn, and the rest of it?”

“Surely! Brains and brawn, sight and hearing, got to have all of they to put on that there roof. Any fool can lay a few sheets of corrugated iron and a tarpaulin over rafters. Takes all of a man to put on a decent roof.”

To Timothy's stupefaction, the baronet later enlarged upon this point of view. Over the traditional roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at lunch he said,

"Well, me boy, Winterbottom could hardly have done you prouder. Throw out a few good, heavy texts they all know, and the story of the money changers—a great favourite, that—they all think it means the Government, you know—and you've got the congregation in the bag."

"But the whole sermon, as well as the way the notice of tomorrow's meeting was given out, was dead against what my Society is trying to do!"

"Don't you believe it, my dear feller. I wouldn't mind betting that the village is convinced the church roof is as good as on, and that you're the little god in the woodpile, or whatever it is. I don't say the money will roll in to any great extent, you know. One thing, they haven't got it; another thing, they wouldn't part with it if they had. But you'll find they're with you, every step of the way, especially if you throw out a hint or two, when you make your big speech tomorrow, that there might be a few paid jobs going when they come home from work and have had their tea."

At half-past three that afternoon, when the squire was asleep in the library with the Sunday paper gently rising and falling upon his distended waistcoat, and Timothy was turning the pages of *John Macnab*, which he knew almost by heart, visitors were announced.

"Mr. Frimley, Miss Frimley, and Bert King," said Mrs. Prynne, in condemnatory tones. "They can stay to tea. I've baked," Anything more like one of the Borgias inviting guests in with gently smiling jaws, Timothy could hardly imagine. The squire came to with a snort, Timothy put his book on the floor and got up out of his chair, and Miss Frimley, in black, purple, and a hat she had made for herself, sailed forward, followed by a

poker-faced nephew and Bert King in his creaking Sunday best.

“We shan’t stay,” said Miss Frimley. “We have come to congratulate Mr. Herring upon the vicar’s sermon. It has made you, Mr. Herring, a freeman of the village. Never has the vicar spoken more clearly against anyone, not even on the occasion when he gave us the strongest possible condemnation of Mr. Manciple, who sentenced one of the Youth Club boys to Borstal training for knifing Farmer Heatherington when the unfortunate man interfered in a gang project for maiming his sheep. I congratulate you, and I propose to put in an appearance at your meeting tomorrow and to donate publicly a small cheque towards the furtherance of your enterprise, which I prophesy, without fear of contradiction, is doomed to failure. Well, Ganymede, are you not going to invite me to sit down?”

“Thought you weren’t staying,” said Sir Ganymede.

CHAPTER NINE

Goodnight, Ladies

“Yes, Mr. Herring,” went on Miss Frimley, “after this morning’s service—so-called, although the vicar, far from rendering service, except to those abysmal young louts of his, is the most stiff-necked (I do not say uncircumcised; my knowledge does not extend so far), obstinate, *managing* incumbent (how true and exact a word!) ever wished on an oppressed and down-trodden parish—after this morning, I say, the whole village will be against you to a man. Thank you, Ganymede, a cup of tea would be most refreshing, and I will say for Mrs. Prynn that she infuses an excellent pot.”

Sir Ganymede, who, in spite of his housekeeper’s hint, had betrayed no intention whatever of offering his visitors tea, signed to Godfrey to ring the bell.

“You’re wrong about the village. They’ll be solid for young Herring. Godfrey,” he added reflectively, casting the Sunday paper on to the floor, whence Miss Frimley retrieved it and tidily put it together, “in my opinion is not the sort of name anybody should have saddled a boy with.”

“It is a very good sort of name,” retorted Miss Frimley, “and far more suited to him than Ganymede is to you.”

“I don’t dispute that. What I am asking you to do is to look at the Godfreys of English literature. Think of

Godfrey Ablewhite in *The Moonstone*! Muse upon Godfrey What-Name—oh, I know, Cass—the chap in *Silas Marner*! What price Sir Godfrey Haslam in *Men and Wives*? Oh, and a hundred others!”

“I am prepared to wager that you could not name *one* other,” said Miss Frimley. “Your reading is curiously circumscribed, even for a man of your mediocre education and insufficient intelligence.”

The battle was postponed by the entrance of Mrs. Prynne with the tea-tray.

“Prynne takes tea with us,” said Sir Ganymede.

“Naturally,” returned his adversary. “In fact, it’s high time you married her. Mrs. King is a big girl now.”

“She wouldn’t have had her looks if *you’d* been her mother,” said Mrs. Prynne. “Thank God, kneeling, that you never had a good man’s love.”

To what extent it was an accident, and to what extent he did it deliberately, in order to cut short these rather frightful exchanges, Timothy could not have said, but he caught the button of his sleeve on the handle of his cup as he reached out to accept a slice of thin bread and butter, and the resultant cascade put an end to the conversation. Godfrey, who seemed certain that he knew the reason for the diversion, winked solemnly at Timothy while the mopping-up operations were being carried out, and, as soon as tea was over, he got up and announced that he and his aunt must be going, as they had much to do before Evensong.

The vicar’s evening sermon was mild and (Timothy thought) conciliatory, compared with that of the morning, although he couched the announcement of the parish meeting in the same terms as before. His text and its context, too, were less inflammatory than the morning’s quotation from St. John.

“... ‘to give us a reviving,’” stated the vicar, “‘to set up the house of our God, and to repair the

desolations there-of, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.' A comforting promise, my dear people, and yet, of course, based on disaster." He went on to talk, to the soporific benefit of his congregation (augmented by the presence of such wives and mothers as had been obliged, in the morning, to prepare the Sunday dinner), of old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago. Except for what was implicit in the text, he made no reference whatever in his sermon to any of the proposals to repair the roof of Parsons Purity church.

Sir Ganymede did not attend Evensong. "One bucketful of that wind-bag," he gracefully confided to Timothy, "is as much as I can stomach in one day." So Timothy, almost the first person to leave the church when the service was over, walked alone to the lych-gate, and found Jane Stretton standing there.

"Hullo," she said. "Come and have dinner with me."

"I'm terribly sorry. Sir Ganymede will be expecting me to supper, I'm afraid."

"Tell him you're invited out."

"I'd love to, but I can't very well. I'm staying there, you know."

"Well, look, I must see you. It's important. Will you call round? You don't have to stay in with him until he goes to bed, do you? Look, Tim, you *must* come! A quarter to nine, and say you'll be staying the night."

Timothy laughed, but she persisted.

"I'll come in for a drink, then," he said, "but I can't possibly stay the night, so don't be silly."

"But you can't spend another night in *that* house!"

"Why ever not?"

"Well . . ." She stopped short. Timothy waited expectantly. "Well, you come round at a quarter to nine, and perhaps I'll tell you," she said. It was not what she had begun to say, he decided.

"All right," he said, "but why not tell me now, while I walk you back to your home?"

"It would take too long, unless you're sure you won't come in and have dinner. I do my own cooking on Sundays, and my Sunday meal is something I know you'd appreciate." They stepped out along the road and in a short time reached her gate. When he opened it for her, she added, "I dreamt about you last night. I dreamt you were in danger."

"Did you?" He was still determined to say nothing to her of his disquieting visitor of the night. "The only danger I've been in . . ."

"Oh, so the dream was right! You *have* been in danger! Oh, Tim!"

"The only danger I've been in," repeated Timothy, "was the result of accident, and accidents, since, of their very nature, they are fortuitous and unpredictable, are not very likely to repeat themselves—unlike history, and steak and onions," he added unnecessarily.

"Tell me what happened."

"Only that the rope which acts as a handrail in the church tower suddenly pulled away at one point and nearly made me lose my footing. Even if I had, the result would only have been a few bruises. What might have been a bit more serious—only nothing happened—was that the last ladder in the tower came away from the wall when I was coming down it. I managed to swing it back, but I did Godfrey Frimley's fingers a bit of no good, I'm afraid. He was supposed to be holding it steady at the top, you see."

"Oh, that's terribly worrying!"

"How do you mean?"

"Things always go in threes! There's another accident to come!"

“Count Frimley’s fingers as one of the three. That will put things right. Are you really as superstitious as that?”

She did not answer, except to say goodbye and that she would be expecting him at about a quarter to nine. Timothy walked back to the Hall and Mrs. Prynne let him in. Apart from her and the manservant Castle (mentioned by Sir Ganymede but, so far, unseen by the guest) there appeared to be no other domestic help, and Timothy could not help wondering how, between them, they managed to keep the house in such excellent order. He ventured a discreet compliment.

“What a beautifully kept house, Mrs. Prynne.”

“But not a beautiful *kept* woman, eh, Mr. Herring?” was her somewhat startling response. “Sir Ganymede is in the library, and not best pleased with you.”

The baronet endorsed this view as soon as Timothy entered.

“Saw you walking that damn woman home,” he growled. “What’s *she* got to say for herself? Spotted her lying in wait for you at the lych-gate, dammit. A fine choice of a trysting-place, I must say! Told Prynne to go out and chase her away, but she refused. Well, what did Jane Stretton talk about?”

“She very kindly asked me to go over for a drink this evening.”

“Going?”

“Oh, yes, if you don’t mind my deserting you for half-an-hour.”

“Half-an-hour? She’ll keep you there for the night if you’re not careful. You mind you don’t burn your fingers. That woman’s dynamite. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. Well, what sort of fool did Winterbottom make of himself this evening?”

“When you and I first got to know one another,” said Timothy, “you referred to Winterbottom as a

twerp, but told me that you were heart and soul with him over this business of the roof. I begin to understand the reason."

"Prynne!" yelled Sir Ganymede. "Where's the supper?"

"Your alliance with him puzzled me," Timothy continued, "until you told me about the ladders."

"Prynne!"

"Now, now," said Mrs. Prynne, appearing in the doorway so promptly that Timothy suspected her of listening at the keyhole. "The supper's ready when you are. I knew you'd get into trouble over those ladders. Come along."

During the meal of cold chicken, salad, and potatoes baked in their jackets, Sir Ganymede remained silent. From his end of the long table he kept raising his eyes from his plate and glancing at Timothy with as much cunning and malice as any Israel Hands. When the meal was over, they returned to the library.

"You noticed, I suppose, Prynne didn't sit down with us?" Sir Ganymede remarked, hastily putting back the cigar he had taken from the box and taking the cigarette which Timothy was offering. "You've offended her, you know, prancing off with the Stretton woman like that."

"I'm sorry to have offended Mrs. Prynne," said Timothy, "but, really, I can't see that it matters to her with whom I go 'prancing off,' as you choose to call it."

"No, no, you're right about that, of course. Just thought I'd mention it, Prynne being, so to speak, yer hostess."

Timothy did not reply, and they finished their cigarettes. Then the baronet got up, fidgeted at one of the bookshelves, removed books and put them back again, and at last selected one and settled himself in his chair. Timothy lit another cigarette and pondered

over what had happened, and upon the people he had met, during the past few days. The cigarette finished, he glanced at his watch.

"I shan't be late back," he said.

"Won't stay up for yer," said Sir Ganymede. "Here! You'd better have my spare key." Timothy accepted the spare key, thanked him for it, went out to the car, and was soon at Jane Stretton's gate. Her front door was opened by a dark-haired, bold-eyed girl whom he took to be Trudi. He bade her good evening and was about to give his name when she forestalled him.

"Mr. Herring, no, please?"

"In person. You must be Fräulein Trudi."

"*Ja*. Not so loud. Mrs. Stretton sleeps."

"She is expecting me."

"Not any more, no. She goes to bed. She sleeps."

"Oh, she's gone to bed? I hope she isn't ill?"

"No, no, not ill. Just that she sleeps. I am to say so. One guesses—one concludes—" Her dark, sophisticated eyes were full of malicious amusement.

"Oh, well, give her my regards when she wakes up."

"You could still come in. I make some coffee for you."

"Thanks, but no. Goodnight." He went back to the car and drove around the lanes and minor roads for half an hour. He had no intention of telling Sir Ganymede that Mrs. Stretton, whatever her reason, had elected not to see him. When he got back he saw that somewhere in the church there was a light. He stopped the car and heard the sound of the organ. He left the car at Sir Ganymede's open gates, crossed the road, and followed the path through the church-yard to the porch. He went into the church to find that only the chancel was lighted. The effect was strangely theatrical. He stood in the soft darkness of the nave

and saw the oak panels of the screen thrown into high relief with the light behind them. It picked up the woven reredos with its tapestried figures, the polished brass of the altar vessels, and the candlesticks, the gold-embroidered cloth, the carved oak of the communion rail. Timothy felt as though he were looking at the setting of a play. The sound of the organ added to the effect of contrived and impressive unreality.

Timothy, with the instinctive reaction of most living things, relaxed and groped his way towards the light.

He sat in the front pew nearest to the pulpit and listened to the sound of the organ. He had no doubt whatever that it was Jane Stretton who was playing. He waited until Bach's *Canzona in D Minor* came to an end, and then went into the chancel, but, before he could reach her, the organist had begun to play Alain's *Litanies*. He came to the organ and stood half-beside and half-behind the bench on which Jane was seated. He sensed that she knew he was there.

He looked at her fine hands, the hands of the woman of stone who lay on Dame Alice's tomb. The music itself scarcely reached him, in the sense that he was not consciously listening any longer. If he had definite thoughts, they were of this strange setting for what he was going to say, its eeriness coupled with its harmony with his mood, a kind of inevitability about it, as though it was something he had always known would be the background to a drama in which he would be an involuntary and yet a compulsive performer. By daylight, he knew, he could have resisted or laughed off this state of apprehension and excitement, but there, in the church, and at night, it was as though he was under a spell.

The sounds ceased at last. Jane sat with her hands still resting on the keyboard and her head slightly bent. Timothy moved round a little until he stood directly

behind her, then he put his hands on her shoulders. She did not move.

"I knew you were there," she said. "I hoped you'd come."

"Why didn't you wait in for me? You did invite me, you know."

"Trudi was there. An Austrian friend has always come on Sundays to pick her up in his car. Today, because I particularly wanted her out of the way, of course he didn't come."

"Life's like that," said Timothy. "What about going for a drive? I've got the car outside." As soon as she had spoken, as soon as he had felt the firm bones of her shoulders through the thin dress she was wearing, the spell was broken and his mood had changed. He took his hands away.

"All right," she said. She stood up and turned to him. "I've something to tell you. Go out to your car. I'll turn the lights off. I won't be a minute. I've a coat somewhere about."

"Let me . . ."

"No, it's all right. I can find my way in the dark, but I doubt whether you could find yours. Here, go out through the vestry. It's the quickest way. I'll put the light on for you."

The vestry door was on the north side. Scarcely had Jane Stretton pushed him out and closed the small door behind him when he noticed that someone had switched on the light in the crypt. He hardly thought that Jane had done such a pointless thing. He supposed some careless visitor had neglected to obey the instruction to turn off the light when leaving. Timothy had, in many ways, the tidy, disciplined, almost frugal mind of the wealthy man, so he went over to switch the light off. He descended the steps and was startled and somewhat shocked by what he saw.

Mrs. Prynne, with a shawl of fine black wool partly covering her head, was on her knees in front of the one carved pillar. Her face was lifted towards the diabolic face of the stone demon. Her lips were moving. Her expression was one of devotional ecstasy. Timothy crept back up the steps and crunched his way over the churchyard gravel to the road and the welcome lamps of his car. The lights in the chancel had been extinguished, he noticed.

He squeezed himself into the driver's seat, and waited. He waited for a patient ten, and then an impatient twenty minutes. Then he drove back to Mrs. Stretton's house. It was in darkness. He knocked at the door. Trudi answered it.

"Oh, you again!" she exclaimed. "But I tell you that Mrs. Stretton is in bed! Perhaps, of course. . . ?" She paused, and smiled archly at him. Timothy bade her goodnight and drove back to the Hall. He wondered what the game was. Had Jane guessed at his state of mind?—and how it had suddenly altered?

"Anyway, I could hardly have made love to her in church, even if it was only in the organ loft," he said aloud.

CHAPTER TEN

Public Meeting

Timothy locked his bedroom door that night and slept soundly. A modicum of reasoning had assured him that, far from having guessed that he had wanted to make love to her, Jane Stretton was in some sort of trouble which she wanted to confide to him, but that, at the last minute, she could not bring herself to the point of revealing what it was.

Mrs. Prynne appeared at breakfast, impassive, ugly, and dignified, and waited upon him and her employer with her habitual taciturnity. After the post-breakfast cigarette, Timothy walked over to the church. The ladders, which had been removed early on Sunday morning, were in position again, but there was nobody about. Timothy mounted the nearest ladder and began another detailed inspection of the roof.

He was not a qualified surveyor. Phisbe's specialist would come later, if the report on the church justified the Society's taking direct action. He knew enough about timber construction, however, to realise that, as he had suspected, and as his cursory inspection from the top of the tower with Godfrey Frimley and his more detailed work on the long ladders had confirmed, the church possessed a fine example of a thirteenth-century arch-braced roof, not quite as he had deduced

it, but near enough to make no difference to its splendid craftsmanship.

The spaces between the common rafters had been boarded in, and these boards, naturally enough the weakest part of the structure, would need repairs and replacements, but the wall-plates and purlins were sturdy enough, and so were the principal rafters which carried the gables. From the shape of the barrel ceiling visible from the inside of the church, the arch-braces could be deduced, and, for extra strengthening against the thrust of the purlins, there were collar beams placed crosswise from one side of the roof to the other. Wall-plates joined the arch-braces, and the latter also rested on wall-posts.

He spent a long while, and had climbed the available long ladders not once, but several times, when Sir Ganymede's voice from below hailed him.

"Come on down! I'm out of drinks. You'll have to take me to the pub, and you may as well give me lunch while we're there."

As giving Sir Ganymede lunch at the pub, with drinks thrown in, appeared by this time to have become an old Spanish custom, Timothy descended to the churchyard.

"Right. I've finished, except for jotting down another note or two and making a few sketches," he said. "Be with you at my car in half an hour. Would Mrs. Pryne care to join us?"

"Pryne? Oh, dear me, no. A most strait-laced woman. Wouldn't dream of appearing in a pub, even to have her lunch. I often wonder she doesn't join these Dissenting fellers, you know."

Timothy, with a vivid recollection of a rapt Mrs. Pryne on her knees before the devil, wondered whether the "Dissenting fellers" would welcome her in their midst. He went up to his room, made his last

notes and sketches, washed and changed, and went out to the drive to place himself at the squire's service.

It was not more than a quarter to twelve when they went into the *Nesting Pheasant*. The bar was empty except for themselves and Bob, who was piously polishing glasses. He put down the cloth.

"Good morning, sir, what will it be?"

"Whisky," said Sir Ganymede.

"Pint of bitter," said Timothy. He followed the squire to the table and they sat side by side to face the bar.

"If I don't have a stool, I like to sit this way round," said Sir Ganymede, taking a gulp which half-emptied his glass. "Like to see who comes in through that damned door. Never allow yourself to be taken in the rear, my dear feller. First rule of warfare. And never fight on two fronts unless you have to—that's another point worth noting."

Timothy thought that this might be leading up to something. He drank some beer and waited. He was not wrong.

"Fact is," went on Sir Ganymede, eyeing his empty glass, "I've too many enemies, you know."

"Really? You surprise me," said Timothy, with a polite inflexion which, he hoped, disguised the irony.

"I can't make it out myself, so I don't wonder you're surprised. Yes, too many enemies, that's my trouble. Take this feller Pimm, for example. Know him? Yes, of course you do."

"I've spoken to him here, I believe, and wasn't he one of the chaps who helped to take the tarpaulins off the church roof?"

"That's him. Has a dirty great rock garden. Tons more stuff than he knows what to do with. You'd think he'd do the neighbourly thing, and ask me over to see whether he'd got anything I'd like, but will he? No, my dear feller, he will not. Consequence is, when I want

anything, I've got to go to his place and help myself. What do you think of that, eh? And, do you know," the baronet went on earnestly, "the damn feller resents it! I say, drink up and let's have another. My round. At least," he added, smacking his pockets, "it would be, if I'd remembered to bring my wallet."

Timothy went to the bar and returned with the drinks. After all, he had enjoyed Sir Ganymede's hospitality at the Hall, he reflected.

"You were saying you had too many enemies," he remarked, anxious to avoid the necessity of being pressed by the baronet for an opinion on the dealings with Horace Pimm. Sir Ganymede became confidential and, to prove it, lowered his voice.

"All these damned fathers and brothers and sweethearts and second cousins once removed," he explained. "They blame me, don't yer know. As though I'm the only pebble on the beach, dammit!"

"Ah," said Timothy, finding himself no more anxious to pursue this subject than the one which had gone before.

"I can see yer a man of the world," said the squire gratefully. "No need for details. But you see what I mean. Cannon to right of them, cannon to left of them, eh, what? Drink up, and let's go in to lunch."

They returned to Parsons Purity at three, and Timothy, having seen the baronet installed in a comfortable chair in the library, went off in his car to call on Jane Stretton. He told himself that he had a bone to pick with her. He also recoiled from spending a matter of four hours or so, until the public meeting began in the parish hall, *tête-à-tête* with the squire.

Jane was not surprised to see him. She said so, and invited him in, adding that Trudi had gone to London for the day. When he was seated, she went on:

"You're still in one piece, then?"

"Oh, yes. I locked my door. I didn't really expect a visitor, of course, but I thought it might be better to be safe than sorry."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"Oh, only that, as I told you, they've given me the Uncanny Room. It does seem a bit odd, as a matter of fact. The other night I could have sworn I had a visitor."

"Oh, Tim, you must have been dreaming!"

"I suppose so." He still did not intend to tell her about the knife. "Oh, well, let's talk about something interesting."

"All right. You begin."

"Are you coming to the meeting tonight?" (It was clear that she had thought better of confiding anything to him, he decided.)

"I hadn't thought so. Why should I?" she enquired.

"Because you're the one who's responsible for it. There wouldn't be any meeting if you hadn't written that letter to Phisbe, so you'd better turn up and support me."

"A lot of use *my* support will be, but I'll come if you like. No, I won't. I'll be more use outside, but I *will* stand by you, Tim, if it's only to fetch the police."

"The police? Good Lord, it's only a village get-together! And now what about playing to me before you give me my tea?"

She played Chopin, Ravel, and Debussy. When she had concluded *La Fille aux Cheveux de Lin*, she walked to the fireplace and asked for a cigarette.

"When is your next concert?" he asked, as he lit the cigarette for her.

"I don't know. I haven't played in public since Christopher left me."

"Do you mind very much? About not playing in public, I mean."

“That isn’t what you meant,” she said. “No, I don’t mind at all. He means nothing to me now—*especially* now.”

Timothy thought of his invaluable fictitious wife and steeled himself. “Well, that’s fine. I’m glad it’s all right,” he said.

“Oh, Tim!” Her laughter was that of sheer exasperation. “Talk about horse to water!”

“Yes,” he said. “Sometimes the horse must feel he’s playing it a bit low down, though, don’t you think?”

“Bless you, you chivalrous idiot! Go back and get ready for your silly old meeting!”

“What? No tea?” he said.

The parish hall was already filling up when Timothy and Sir Ganymede arrived. Timothy could have done without the company of the unpopular and outspoken baronet, particularly as Sir Ganymede had been given a seat on the platform by reason of his position in the village, but there was no way of getting rid of him short of clubbing him over the head before they set out, so Timothy was obliged to bear with him and to hope that his interpolations (which were inevitable) would not gum up the proceedings by provoking a riot.

In the event, it did not need the squire to provoke a riot. It was soon evident that certain warring factions in the village (to whom Sir Ganymede earlier had made reference) had come not to listen or to discuss, but to give battle.

The first inkling Timothy had of this state of affairs was during the vicar’s opening speech as chairman of the meeting. Mr. Winterbottom began by giving a short history of the church, together with a list of its incumbents, so far as these were known, and had got as far as “and in 1593, you may remember, we had Nicholas Frampton, from whom the living passed to his younger brother Richard in 1600, although neither—in

fact, none of our incumbents—lived in the parish itself until, in 1838, it became incumbent (ha! ha!) upon them to do so,” when there came the first of the interruptions which were to be the main feature of the evening.

“Cut the cackle, and get to the new-laid eggs,” suggested an uncultured voice. The vicar looked pained.

“All in good time, my friend,” he replied. “I will proceed, if you will permit me.”

“I wish you would,” thought Timothy. By the clock at the back of the hall, Mr. Winterbottom had already been on his feet for twenty minutes.

“The second of the Framptons remained in office until 1613,” the vicar went on, “and was followed by . . .”

“Uncle Tom Cobley and all!”

“The vicar of Bray, more like!”

“Really!” protested the vicar of Parsons Purity. “You *must* give me a hearing!”

“Pin back your lug-’oles, mates!” advised a youthful member of the audience. Sir Ganymede rose to his feet.

“You louts and misfits from Coggs Lane will shut your perishing heads, dammit!” he thundered. “I shall come down there and disembowel you, Herbert Sims, if you let out one more crack! Hold your tongue, you oaf, and try to learn something from your betters. You, too, Jeff Pullen, unless you want trouble. Go on, Winterbottom,” he concluded, without attempting to modulate his voice, “and for heaven’s sake shorten it up, man!”

“That’s the stuff! Three cheers for squire!” shouted someone.

“Cor! The dirty old man! Let’s douse ’im in pond, boys!” advised someone else.

"Take vicar off! 'E bowls wides!"

"Let the London gent 'ave a bash!"

"Chuck 'im out! We don't want no Lunnon folk here!" Some scuffling began. The vicar sat down. The squire, purple in the face, remained on his feet.

"Pray silence, you unspeakable yobs, for Mr. Timothy Herring!" he bellowed.

"Stinking fish!"

"Send 'im back where 'e belongs, the. . . !"

"Dry up! Give 'im a chance!"

"'E's after our money!"

"Duck 'im in pond!"

"Douse 'im in pond along o' squire!"

"'E's a bloody politician!"

"You should talk, Fred Byers! Oo sold 'is vote for a coupla pints?" A general guffaw followed this sally.

"You'd better make a start," said Sir Ganymede, turning to Timothy. "Pitch it strong! Shout 'em down and give 'em the works!"

"They're more likely to give *me* the works," Timothy replied. He got to his feet. The uproar had died away. "Ladies and gentlemen," Timothy began, "I think one of you has already voiced the object of this meeting. I am not a politician, but I am, of course, after your money." This simple statement produced a good deal of ironic cheering and a considerable amount of whistling and booing. The sounds were silenced for a moment when somebody at the back of the hall defeated all other noise by agitating a watchman's rattle. Taking advantage of the sudden lull when the rattle ceased its hideous staccato cacophany, Timothy went on, "I have to thank you for attending this meeting, and I crave your indulgence while I emphasise its object."

"We'll indolge you, you . . . , I don't think!"

"Go you back where you come from!"

“Rush the platform, boys!”

“Dry up! Give he a chance!”

“Us don’t want no foreigners here!”

“Let’s go and smoke out old Badbury!”

“Garn! Us can do that any old time. Come on, all together now!”

Timothy waited grimly. At the back of the hall a fight broke out. Apparently there were other scores to be settled. The meeting was not unanimously against him, that was something. Then about twenty of the quiet respectable villagers, seated near the front, broke ranks and walked out. Their departure was attended by cat-calls, but the scuffling at the back went on. Timothy sat down. The squire appeared to be urging some course of action on the vicar, to which the latter was shaking his head. Suddenly there was the shrill war-cry of a police whistle, and through a side door came a uniformed figure.

“Now, now, what be all this, then?” it enquired.

The majesty of the law is, in England, a strange and remarkable thing. There were those in the hall who had been at school with Police Constable Markham. There were those who, in boyhood’s carefree days, had punched him in the stomach; those who had scrumped apples and plums in his company; those who had attempted, like him, to seduce the village maidens in Lovers Lane.

All that belonged to the past. At the age of eighteen, Alf Markham had dedicated himself. He had foresworn his foolish ways. He had donned, with his uniform, an armour of moral rectitude and the invincible toffee nose of undisputed authority. He became the village conscience, and nowadays, in the full realisation of the importance and inviolability of his office, he pinched, without fear, favour, or

compunction, the boon companions of his past, and ran them in.

On this occasion, as usual, his advent immediately produced a seemly calm and a complete cessation of violence. The only rebellious voice thought better of it after the exchange of a couple of sentences or so.

“Oo sent for *you*, Alf Markham?” it demanded.

“Never you mind oo sent for me. Everybody in this ’all is under arrest for disturbing of the peace. Now just you carry on quiet and orderly, Bill Fear. I be ’ere, and I be ’ere to stay.”

Bill Fear muttered uncomplimentary things under his breath. Sir Ganymede stood up.

“Thank you, constable,” he said grandly. “You lot at the back had better remember that I am a Justice of the Peace, and empowered to read the Riot Act at you, dammit.”

“Yes, yes,” said the vicar, “we will observe the decencies of debate, good people, if you please. I call upon Mr. Herring to resume his remarks.”

“I won’t keep you long,” said Timothy. “Mr. Winterbottom has outlined to you the history of your church. It is a building of which any parish could be proud. It does need a new roof, of course.”

“You said it, mister!”

“Ask ’em where the lead went to!”

“Quiet, you, Bob Potts!” (This from Constable Markham.)

“I represent a Society which helps in such matters.”

“Us doon’t want no Lunnon folks ’ere!”

“Just a minute! This has nothing to do with London. Our members come from all over England. No, don’t interrupt again. I’ve almost finished. We will help to pay for your new roof, but we want you to do your share. It doesn’t have to be a big share, but I’m sure you don’t want charity.”

“‘Undredweight o’ slack and no Christmas dinner!” piped up a sardonic old voice.

“So, if you’ll do your part, as a sign of goodwill, you can be sure that we’ll do ours, but, of course, my Society will want to know how much support we can expect from the parish if we agree to help you. Would anyone like to ask a question?”

“Yes,” said Miss Frimley, from her seat in the front row. “Suppose we agree to subscribe towards the cost of these repairs, what guarantee have we from your side that you will foot the rest of the bill?”

“I will leave the address of our bankers with Mr. Winterbottom.”

“A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, young man.”

“Some bird!” said a rude person at the back of the hall, bestowing loud, lascivious kisses upon the unresponsive air.

“Any other questions?” asked Timothy, anxious to avoid an argument with the formidable aunt of the younger churchwarden.

“Who’s a-going to do the job?” asked a calm voice from three rows back.

“There will be work for local people, of course,” said Timothy.

“That ent no answer.” The speaker was Bert King. “As churchwarden, I want it straight, sir.”

“All right. The job itself will have to go to a firm of contractors, of course, but . . .”

He was not allowed to finish. Booing, cat-calling, thumping on the floor, and indignant howls drowned effectively the end of his sentence. Timothy sat down. Police Constable Markham blew his whistle. The vicar advanced almost to the edge of the platform.

“If there are no more questions,” he said, the police-whistle having had its former magical effect, “I

will put to the meeting this proposition: that the parishioners of Parsons Purity accept the kind offer of Mr. Herring and his Society to render financial assistance in the matter of repairing the roof of the church, and—”

“Just a minute,” shouted a belligerent voice. Timothy had noted, at the beginning of the meeting, that Pimm was present. “This roof. What’s it to be? My meaning being, what’s it to be made of? ‘Cause I, for one, aren’t subscribing to any old iron.”

When Constable Markham had succeeded, through the agency of his whistle, in quelling the rousing chorus of the popular song which inevitably followed upon these unfortunate words, Timothy joined the vicar at the front of the platform.

“I’m glad you asked that, Mr. Pimm,” he said, loudly. “The whole point is that my Society deprecates, as much as you do . . .”

The voices began again,

“Aw, cut it out!”

“Put a sock in it!”

“‘Ev’ve swallered the dictionary!”

“*Quiet!*” (This from the police constable.)

“My Society would not seek to contemplate or sanction any form of roofing short of the best. We propose to replace the lead . . .”

“Wot, buy it back again?” This apparently pertinent query was received with derisive mirth and ironic cheering.

“*Quiet*, Ben Wright, else I takes you into the custody o’ the law,” roared Constable Markham. “You mind what I says, now! “Tain’t no business of yourn what your betters does. ‘Ad your outing to Blackpool larst year, didden you? Well, dry up, then!”

“We propose to use either lead or tiles. If you agree, we shall ask for tenders and then go straight

ahead with the work," shouted Timothy, who, although not actually panic-stricken, was unaccustomed to this kind of meeting.

"I put it to you lot," said the squire, apparently thinking it was time to assert himself, "that it's time we . . ."

"I object," said Frimley, seated between his aunt and Mrs. Prynne in the front row. (Mrs. King, Timothy had noticed, was not at the meeeting.) "The motion should be put by the chairman."

"Oh, all right, dammit," said the squire. "Get on with it, Winterbottom. I want a drink." He sat down sulkily.

"I put the motion to the meeting. Those in favour?" said the vicar.

"In favour o' what? I a'n't 'eard nothing proposed!" yelled a voice from the back of the hall.

"Good Lord, Tom Timms, haven't you been listening, man? Or are you as big a fool as you look?" demanded Sir Ganymede, leaning forward belligerently.

"I've bin a-listenin' all right, and to a right load of old rubbish, if you arst *me*! Tell them as knocked orf the roof to put it back, then. *You'd* ought to know oo them is, if anybody do!" retorted Tom Timms brutally.

This time even Constable Markham and his police-whistle failed to quell the pandemonium. The meeting, as the *Cranthorne and District News and Advertiser* reported in its next issue, broke up in disorder. It was an understatement. It broke up in such chaos that the platform speakers made a bee-line for the back door.

"Well," said Timothy, accompanying Sir Ganymede back to Trogett Hall, "I may as well be on my way. There's no point in staying until tomorrow."

"How d'yer mean, no point in staying until tomorrow?"

“It’s quite clear I’m getting no support here. The sooner I get back to London now, and put in my report, the sooner Phisbe can decide what’s best to be done. If you want to come with me, you’d better pack at once.”

“Look here, my dear feller, sleep on it. You’ll feel better when you’ve had a good rest. The meeting meant nothing—nothing at all. You don’t know the village. They enjoyed themselves like hell, barracking and shouting and milling about, and the rest of it. It makes no difference. I told Winterbottom not to hold a meeting, but to let you go from house to house, but he knew better. I believe he did, too. They’ll all go home as pleased as punch, you’ll see. They’ve had their say, and they’re satisfied, and we beat a strategic retreat, like good soldiers. Come now, let’s get Prynne to cut us a sandwich, and we’ll drink to the parish in a very respectable drop of port I got on tick in London when I was last there.”

Timothy was not convinced, but he gave in.

“All right,” he said, “but I shall want to be off the very first thing in the morning.”

“Breakfast as early as you like, my dear feller. It’s all one to me. When I get back here, I shall have to talk to Winterbottom, and see Frimley and King, and when I’ve seen ’em, and got their opinion, I’ll write. What’s yer home address, eh?”

Timothy gave him the address of his club. He did not intend to have Sir Ganymede descending upon him at his home. He also gave him the telephone number of the club and the address of Phisbe’s headquarters. They ate the excellent ham sandwiches which Mrs. Prynne provided, and (whether or not the squire had, in fact “got it on tick,” a statement which, familiar though he was with Sir Ganymede’s skill in providing himself with free drinks, Timothy was inclined to doubt) the port was all that had been claimed for it. It was in a

much more optimistic mood than, at the conclusion of the meeting, he would have believed possible, that he announced his intention of going along to say goodbye to the vicar. Sir Ganymede cocked a benevolent eye at him.

“I’ll say yer farewells to Winterbottom, my dear feller. You push along and see Jane Stretton. That’s what you really mean to do.”

As this was the exact truth, Timothy made no reply, except to say that he would not be late, and that, as he still had the spare latchkey, there was no need for anybody to wait up for him. The baronet received this considerate suggestion with a lewd wink, and commanded Mrs. Prynne, who still had a half-glass of port in front of her, to drink whatever toast seemed to her most suitable, but to get out and leave him in peace. As she had remained silent, as usual, the last injunction seemed unnecessary.

Timothy went to his room, hastily packed his belongings, and walked to Jane Stretton’s house. It was not so much that he wanted to take farewell of her. His main objective was to obtain permission to use her telephone so that he could let his man know that he was to be expected on the morrow in time for lunch at his country home, a call which he did not intend that the squire should overhear.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Benjamin's Sack

Timothy heard the sound of the piano as he reached the gate. He listened for a minute or so, and then knocked at the door. It was opened by Trudi. There was a smudge of flour on her plump, warm cheek and she was wearing a large, brightly flowered overall.

"Ah!" she said. "Welcome! Three for supper, then? No?"

"Thank you very much, but I'm afraid it's no. I've only come to say goodbye to Mrs. Stretton."

"Please to come in. You will know where to find her. It is not so big, this house. Show yourself the way. I am in the kitchen, cooking."

Timothy showed himself the way. Jane, at the piano, was in shadow except for the light from a rose-shaded standard lamp which picked up gold lights in her dark hair. There was no music propped in front of her. He guessed that she was improvising, for he did not recognise the theme. He closed the door as quietly as he had opened it, and stood there, listening, watching the strong fingers, and wishing, perversely and at the same time, that she would go on playing, unconscious of his presence, and, yet, that she would realise, perhaps with pleasure, that he was there, and turn towards him. She made no sign, and the meandering notes, rounded and beautiful, continued to flow under

her hands. Suddenly she broke, as it were, into her own thoughts, and changed the wandering chords with which, he thought, she was illustrating, perhaps unconsciously, her mood, to, of all things, a complicated but unmistakeable hornpipe. He knew then that she realised he was there. He went over to the piano.

“Dance,” she said, without looking up. “Put the light on, and dance.” Timothy took off his jacket and his shoes. “That was very nicely done,” she said, when, laughing, and gasping a little, he had collapsed into an armchair. She went on playing. It was a strange and simple little air this time, and, having played it through twice, as though she was learning the tune, she began to sing, very softly:

*“Is there any room at your head, Saunders?
Is there any room at your feet?
Is there any room at your side, Saunders,
Where fain, fain I would sleep?”*

Her hands rested on the keyboard. Timothy heard the ticking of the clock. Outside the house an owl hooted.

“Do you know the next bit?” he asked. She got up from the piano and came over to him, and stood at his knee, but she did not look at him.

“Yes,” she said, “I know it, but I don’t like it. As it happens, though, it’s true.”

“How do you mean?” He was slightly non-plussed, and even felt a trifle foolish, since, for obvious reasons, he had supposed the verse to be directed to himself.

“He’s dead. Christopher. I heard this morning from his lawyers. I’ve got to go and see them. They offered to come here if I preferred it, but I don’t,” she said.

"Christopher?" He did not know what to say. Condolence seemed hopelessly out of place.

"Yes. It's about the boy—our son, you know." She went over to an armchair and sat down. "It's very disturbing. I suppose I must take him on now. Oh, well, don't let's worry until we know the worst. How did the meeting go?"

"Terribly. Was it you who sent the policeman along to quell the riot?"

"Did you really have a riot?"

"Did we not!" His annoyance at what he felt was the failure of his mission vanished. He gave her a lively account of the meeting and ended by telling her that he would be leaving Parsons Purity at nine in the morning, and might he telephone his home.

"I've got to take Trogett with me," he added ruefully.

"Could you find room for me, too? I shouldn't have any luggage. I telephoned the lawyers and told them to expect me some time tomorrow afternoon, and I shall come back here tomorrow night. I'd sit at the back and not say a single word if you didn't want me to. Oh, Tim, do take me! I dread the thought of making the journey alone."

"All right. But Trogett—I thought you didn't like him."

"Of course I don't like him. He doesn't like me, either. Anyway, he'll sit in front with you, won't he?"

"I suppose so. Yes, of course he will, otherwise I should look like the shuvver, shouldn't I?—and that would upset my *amour propre*. Well, all right, then. I'll be delighted to have you."

"I know you don't mean it, but it's nice to hear you say it. Will you pick me up here? What time?"

"Nine o'clock sharp. I'm spilling off Trogett at Victoria railway station. I don't know where he wants to

go, and Victoria is nowhere near where I want to go, but I'm not having him tail me all over London. Where do *you* want to go?"

"Well, I don't want to be spilled off in his company."

"Right. We'll have lunch together in Soho, when I've got rid of him, and then I'll take you to your lawyers, if you care to tell me where to find them. Fine. May I telephone, then? Don't oversleep tomorrow morning."

"Goodnight, Tim. God bless." She took his hands and pulled him up from his chair. He had expected her to have strong fingers, but, all the same, he was surprised by their grip. When he was standing face to face with her, he kissed her.

"That was very brotherly of you," she said, mockingly. "Almost avuncular, in fact."

"All passion spent," said Timothy lightly, cursing himself for a fool.

"Oh, is that it? Well, goodnight again. Mind the step and shut the gate and . . ."

"Don't trip over my own feet. Right. Sleep tight. Nine o'clock sharp, remember."

The telephone was in the hall. He rang up his man. He put down the receiver. Trudi came out of the kitchen.

"You won't stay and eat my beautiful supper?"

"No, really not, thanks very much. I've got to get back and do my packing."

"I have not seen you in so many suits."

"Nevertheless, I have a rich and varied wardrobe which all has to be stowed in a suitcase. Goodnight, and thanks all the same."

She accompanied him to the gate.

"You kiss me, too?"

"Sorry! I never mix my metaphors." He opened the gate and cantered back to the hall, pursued by Viennese laughter.

* * *

Timothy locked his bedroom door again that night. He had purposely left it until the morning to inform Sir Ganymede that there would be a second passenger in his car. He made the announcement at breakfast.

"We're picking up Mrs. Stretton at nine sharp."

"Jane Stretton? What for?"

"She has business in London."

"Oh? Well, that's all right, because I've changed my mind. I'm not going with yer."

"I know you don't like her, but she'll sit at the back, and has promised to keep quiet. Anyway, I couldn't refuse, when she asked me to give her a lift."

"Oh, it's nothing to do with *her*, my dear feller. Just changed my mind, that's all. When yer coming back, eh?"

"Coming back? Oh, but I shan't be coming back. The meeting last night settled that. It's obvious Phisbe's help isn't wanted here."

"Don't you believe it. What'll you offer me that you're not back here within a week?"

"Two to one in bottles of your very nice port."

"Ah, liked it, did yer? Well, you won't get any more of it *that* way. You'll be back within a week, you mark my words. Is yer baggage ready to be put in the car? I'll get it seen to. Damn feller Castle never earns his keep. Get on to him, Prynne, and tell him to stick Mr. Herring's baggage in the boot. Oh, and ring up Winterbottom and tell him Mr. Herring's off, but he'll be back as soon as he's seen his Society."

"Nothing of the sort, Mrs. Prynne. Just get him for me, if you will. I'll talk to him myself."

"He'll be at early service," said Mrs. Prynne. "I'll leave a message."

At five minutes to nine Timothy, having assured himself that all his possessions were in the car, drove to Jane Stretton's house. She was at the gate.

"Thank goodness for at least one punctual woman," he said.

"Where's Ganymede?"

"Not coming."

"Oh?"

These were the last words which were exchanged until, at half-past ten, they stopped for coffee. Then Jane asked, when they were seated at a table,

"Is it because of me that Ganymede decided not to come?"

"He says not. Says he's changed his mind. He's also betted me I'll be back at Parsons Purity within a week."

"What had you to say to that?"

"That I shouldn't be, of course."

"I was afraid of that. Does that mean you'll *never* come back?"

"Oh, I expect curiosity will bring me back later on, to see just what sort of mess Winterbottom has made of the church roof."

"I see." They finished their coffee, and at just after half-past twelve he pulled up outside a road-house.

"I think we'll have lunch here," he said, "and then you can go straight to your lawyers when we get to Town." He did his best to make light conversation at the table, but his companion's unresponsiveness, coupled with the depressing fact that she was wearing black, made light conversation difficult. At last she said,

"Oh, Tim, don't try so hard. I know I'm being dull and stupid, but I'm dreading this afternoon."

"Oh, lawyers aren't so frightening. I'm always looking them up. Lots of them are almost human."

"It's the boy," she said. "I've got to meet the boy."

"Some boys are comparatively harmless. How old is this one?"

"Six and a bit."

"My dear girl! You can cope with a boy of six!"

"But I don't know what he's been told. He may even have been told that he's Ganymede's son."

Timothy was silent for a moment; then, very gently, he asked,

"Well, is he?"

"No, he isn't!" She spoke almost under her breath, but with intensity. "He's *our* son, Christopher's and mine. I was very ill for a month or two soon after he was born, and by the time I was able to leave the nursing home, they'd both vanished. The baby had been put out to nurse when I was taken ill. I knew that, of course. You see, what happened was that, when he was about two weeks old, I picked up some dreadful bug or other, and for months it wasn't certain whether I'd live or die, and, by the time I was well enough to go home, Christopher and the baby had gone. Christopher left a note telling me not to try to find them, as they'd gone abroad. He said he'd been to see Ganymede, but got no satisfaction, so, as he couldn't prove anything—well, of course he couldn't—there wasn't anything to prove—he had decided to adopt the baby—*adopt*, that was the word he used—and take him away."

"And did you make any attempt to trace them?"

"Would you have done?"

"I don't know. But if the baby was his own son, how come he fixed on Sir Ganymede as the father?"

"Oh, I liked Ganymede then, and he did become—or try to become—a little more than a faithful friend. Christopher found out about that—I think either from Miss Frimley or that frightful Mrs. Prynne—and together with what he knew of Ganymede's reputation and then being told a lot of lies by one or other of those

poisonous women, my denials didn't stand a chance. The baby was premature, you see, and that didn't help."

"I wouldn't worry if the chap is only six years old. Shall you take him over?"

"I suppose so. The alternative is to try to get him adopted, but I don't know anything about that sort of thing."

"Shove it all off on to the lawyers. They'll know how to cope. Great fellows for possessing guns that shoot round corners. Well, when you're ready, let's go."

He set her down at the address she gave him, watched her mount the red-tiled steps to the brass-plated, handsome door, and drove to his club. There he put through a call to Mr. Winterbottom.

"Sorry I couldn't get to you to say goodbye. I shall report to my Society that there's nothing doing."

"I fail to understand you, my dear fellow. Nothing doing about what?"

"Surely, after last night's meeting, there is no more to be said about the re-roofing—from my point of view, I mean."

"Oh, I see. But we should never despair. It is a sin to give up hope."

"I don't think there ever *was* any hope. I think you'll live to regret your corrugated iron, though."

"I wish you would contact me again. Shall we say in about a week? I may have news for you."

"Really? Well, all right, then. At about this time next Tuesday?" (What game was Winterbottom playing? he wondered.)

"Splendid." The vicar sounded as though he meant it. "Find out how much of the cost—what percentage, let us say—your Society would be willing to find if the parish would agree to roof with slate. Lead, I think, is out of the question for us."

"I should have to send somebody down to estimate the price, and I'll probably come down with him. Anyway, I shall have made my report before next Tuesday, so I'll contact you then." He rang off and drove to his country house, garaged the car, let himself in, and called to his manservant.

"Hullo, Birkett," he said. "You might get the bags out of the car."

"Good afternoon, sir. Your letters, which you instructed me not to send on, are on your desk."

"Right. Is the water hot? I've been having nothing but cold tubs since Saturday morning."

He bathed, put on a dressing-gown, and went down to an early tea. Birkett brought in the tray.

"I have unpacked the large suitcase, sir," he said. "What would you wish me to do with the silverware?"

"With the *what*?"

"In place of the tweed suit which you appear, by some inadvertence, to have left behind at the conclusion of your visit to Cranthorne Minster, sir, there is a quantity of antique silver in the suitcase."

"Good Lord! Oh, well, I'll have my tea, as it's here, and then I'll go and have a look at it. There must be some mistake."

There was no mistake, he thought, grinning. This was Sir Ganymede's fatheaded scheme for winning the bet that he would return to Parsons Purity. He wondered, still amused, whether his promise to the vicar over the telephone would invalidate the wager, but decided that it would not. Nothing had been said about the reason for his return, merely that it would take place. He drank two cups of tea and ate buttered tea-cakes, and then went up to his room. The antique silver was laid out on top of the tall-boy. He had not seen it after his bath because his dressing-room communicated directly with the bathroom.

When he looked at the baronet's loot, the joke about the wager fell suddenly flat. This was not Sir Ganymede's amusing if devious scheme for winning a wager. This was a blackmailer's trap. The silver must be returned forthwith, before the trap could be sprung. He dressed and went to the telephone and rang up the Chief Constable.

"Hullo, Herring," said the latter. "Glad to hear your voice, but cut it short. I'm having my tea."

"Right. Can you come round as soon as you've had it? It's most important, or I wouldn't bother you. Something I desperately need advice about. Yes, definitely a police matter, I think. You'll be able to tell me. No, I won't come round to you. You'll know why when I see you. Right. Thanks. At about six, then? Good."

He went to his study to open his mail. The telegram immediately caught his eye, not only because it was a telegram, but because it topped the pile of letters on his desk. He hardly needed to read it. It said. *One thousand please Trogett.*

"Quite a modest request," said Timothy aloud. He rang for Birkett. "When did this telegram come?"

"It was sent on from your club before you arrived, sir. I took the liberty of opening it in case it required an answer which I might be in a position to supply, sir."

"Oh, yes, of course. What did you suppose it meant?"

"I did not suppose anything, sir."

"Oh, come, now, Birkett!"

"As you are not a stockbroker, sir, I wondered whether it might not be an impudent attempt at blackmail."

"I'm inclined to think the same myself. That silver upstairs has been palmed off on me."

“What we might call the Benjamin’s Sack technique, sir. It is not an unknown gambit, I believe.”

“I’m expecting Colonel Selby at about six o’clock. Put out whisky in the library and don’t bother to get any dinner for me. He’s certain to take me back with him. Meanwhile, I’ll make an official inventory of my ill-gotten gains as soon as I’ve looked through the rest of the post.”

There was nothing else of importance—a letter from his sister, embodying, among other trivial matters, her usual advice to him to get married, as she had a number of good-looking, well-bred girls on her visiting-list; another from the Society’s dogsbody complaining that Mr. Anstruther had abstracted the folder on Branksome Castle without having made the requisite note in the Abstractions Book; invitations to various functions, some of them involving an after-dinner speech; other invitations from friends; a couple of bills; the usual crop of advertisements and tradesmen’s circulars—and that was all. Timothy flung the lot into the wastepaper basket and went up to make an inventory of the silver.

The baronet had done him proud. There was a seventeenth-century copy of the twelfth-century silver-mounted crystal cup in the Treasury of San Marco, flanked by a silver-mounted porcelain tankard of Elizabethan English make. Besides these (neither of which had been on show in Sir Ganymede’s glass-topped case) there were the gadrooned beaker he had already seen, a Charles I tankard without a foot-ring (a follower of the Parliament side in the Civil War must have owned this, Timothy surmised; as Royalist property it would have been melted down by a loyal owner to help to pay for the war), a later one of the same century with a prominent and rather heavy foot-base, and a Spanish standing cup of beaker type, which

had the distinction of having the bowl detachable from the stand. The former was entirely plain, while the stand was heavily ornamented and held the cup on a circle of solid, vertical ribs like the trusty calix of a flower. This pleasingly strong construction was set off and emphasised by the widely spaced gadrooning of the base. Probably a piece of considerable value, he thought.

Timothy contemplated the six treasures in silence. Then he called Birkett to come and admire them. He was still lecturing upon them to the patient manservant when the latter interrupted him to say that he thought he heard the sound of the Colonel's car. This opinion was justified by the reverberating crash with which the Chief Constable was accustomed to close the driver's door.

"That's him all right," said Timothy. "Better let him in before he batters the place down." He went downstairs behind his man, greeted his visitor in the hall, and took him straight up to the bedroom. "What do you think of that?" he asked. The Chief Constable assumed the wooden expression with which he hoped he disguised a sense of shock, and gazed at the hoard.

"Been dissipating your inheritance?" he enquired. "If not, what's all this?"

"Birkett found them in my baggage when he unpacked this afternoon."

"Was it *your* baggage, then, or somebody else's?"

"Oh, it was my suitcase all right. Come on down. There's something else I'd better show you, and then I'll tell you a tale."

He took the Colonel into his study and showed him the telegram. The Colonel put it down and looked at him.

"Cryptic, what?" he asked. Timothy smiled, led the way to the library, poured out drinks, and told the story

of his visit to Parsons Purity and his dealings with its squire.

"I think the blighter's trying to blackmail me," he said at the end. "The silver belongs to him, you see. I think he stowed it away in my suitcase, taking out a tweed suit, incidentally, to make room for it and to disguise the added weight, and is hoping I'll play ball and pay him a thousand pounds rather than have him set the police on me for pinching the stuff."

"He must be an innocent!"

"Oh, I don't know. It might work with some people. It won't with me, but I just wondered what, in your view, will be my best course of action."

"I know what *I'd* do, if anybody played such a daft trick on *me*! I'd stick to the stuff and, if he dared to call in the police, I'd declare the things were a free gift and make him prove anything different. That 'ud learn him. I never knew of such damned impudence!"

"It might work if I hadn't got one or two rather decent pieces of my own. Mightn't the police think I had been hoping to add Troggett's stuff to my collection?"

"If you'd been doing that, would you have left your man to unpack your bag and discover the loot?"

"I don't really know. Anyway, what would be your alternative suggestion, if any?"

"Write to him. Keep a copy of the letter, and this I will sign, if you like, when I've compared both drafts. I should tell him that the matter is in the hands of the police at this end, and that if he wants the stuff he can call for it at the police station, but he'll have to prove his claim. That ought to shake him. You say that some of the pieces are things you've never seen before, so you can't swear to them. That's fair enough."

"And what about his telegram?"

“Tell him the police have got that, too. I’d like to teach him a lesson. But I still say he must be a complete tyro if he thought he could get away with this sort of blackmailing stunt. It’s just too damn silly for words!”

“You wouldn’t consider taking the things back to him and telling him what you thought of him?”

“No, I’m damned if I would!”

“Right. I’ll send him a letter, then.”

“Write it straightaway now, make the copy for me to sign, then come along and dine at my place. We’ll stop at a pillar-box on our way.”

“Meanwhile, I suppose I’d better put the silver in my safe.”

“No, in mine. I’ll give you an official receipt for it, and we’ll bung it in to the police station directly after dinner. The station sergeant can give me a receipt for it, and, so far as I can see, in that way you’ll be completely covered if Trogett is still prepared to start any funny business. My guess is that he won’t.”

Timothy enjoyed his dinner. When it was over, and they were seated in the drawing-room, the Chief Constable, far from objecting to a twice-told tale, demanded that the guest should recount his adventures in Parsons Purity for the benefit of the rest of the company, which consisted of his wife and son and the son’s young woman, who was spending a few days with the family. The Colonel’s wife was interested chiefly in the baronet’s rock garden, for the part of the story in which Jane Stretton figured had been given only very sketchy treatment by the narrator.

“Did you see it?” she asked. Timothy, whose interest in rock gardens was, to say the least of it, not more than tepid, replied that he had not. He grinned to himself in bed that night, trying to picture Sir Ganymede’s face when he read the letter, and knew

that the silver, together with the telegram, were in the hands of the police.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bombshells

On the following morning, Timothy rang up the president of Phisbe and told him, very briefly, how matters stood at Parsons Purity. He promised to ring again if and when he heard from the vicar. There would be no committee meeting for another week, unless an emergency arose, and there seemed no point in submitting a report, so he decided to spend the rest of the morning in the saddle, and ordered lunch for two o'clock.

Not more than a couple of hundred yards from his house a sandy path flanked the heather and gorse of a moor. He turned on to this and allowed the horse to amble along at his own pace. The path dipped and rose, so that sometimes the gorse was growing on banking well above the height of his shoulder, and at other times he could see the moor stretching away into vast distances on his right. To his left were rough pastures, boggy where the land dipped to sea-level.

At the top of one of the rises a bridle-path, broad and fair, debouched from his sandy track and crossed the moor. He turned the horse on to it and loosed him into a canter and then into an exhilarating gallop. When he reined him in again, it was to turn on to a minor road which led downhill to a village. Here he hitched him to a fence by the side of a pub, went in for a pint, brought

it out to a bench in the sun, and took his time. Then he went in again for a bit of bread and cheese and another pint, and whiled away a good half hour before he remounted and rode on.

At about a mile from the village, a path through thin woods ran beside a stream and eventually brought him back to the point at which he had taken the road across the moor. He dismounted at his own gate and led the horse round the side of the house to the stables. One of these, the furthest from that which housed the horse, had been converted into a garage. His manservant, his groom, and a couple of women servants were gathered in front of this—or, rather, in front of where this had been. It was now an almost complete write-off, and so, it was more than obvious, was the car.

He handed the horse to the groom and, before he asked any questions, he inspected the damage. The four servants watched in silence until Birkett said,

“It was some kind of explosion, sir. Nobody near it at the time, thank God. We have touched nothing, sir, except to organise the fire-fighting. I’m sorry we couldn’t save the car, sir.”

“When did it happen?”

“Best part of an hour and a half ago, sir. As you had signified you wished lunch not before two, sir, we, that is, Mrs. Frode and Linda and Jackson and myself, sir, were about to sit down to enjoy the mid-day repast when the balloon went up—that is to say, when the explosion occurred.”

“Oh, yes, I see.”

“So I said to Jackson that it sounded to come from the stables, and we, him and me—he and I, sir—ran out to see what was up, and there was the car, sir, enveloped in flames. So we fixed up the garden hose, sir, to the stables tap, and fought the flames as best we

could until the fire brigade arrived. We had indifferent success in saving the car, sir, as I repeat I regret to say, and the garage is not what you would call intact, I'm afraid."

"You've done jolly well, Birkett. All right, I'll have my lunch now, and look into the matter later."

After lunch he rang up the Chief Constable and put the facts, so far as he knew them, before him.

"I'll come round," said the Colonel, "and I'll bring the Inspector if he's available. Good God! If you'd been in the car you might have been killed!"

"No *might* about it," said Timothy. "Right, Colonel, thanks very much. I'll be seeing you, then. I wouldn't trouble you, but this is the second time."

"How do you mean? Second time of what?"

"The second time I've been given to understand that somebody seems to prefer my room to my company." In his account of his visit to Parsons Purity, he had omitted any reference to the incident of the Commando knife for fear of being thought melodramatic, but it had better come out now, he decided. "Somebody had a go at me when I was staying with Trogett."

The Chief Constable turned up at four with the Inspector and a young detective-constable who was introduced as "Selby, who knows all about cars," and they went out to the wrecked garage and stood about, after the Inspector had taken note of what Timothy could tell him, while Selby went to work.

"Well," said the Chief Constable, at the end of half an hour, "not much point in you and me just standing by, Timmy, while the Inspector and the constable are investigating the trouble. What about my questioning the people who were on the spot when it happened?"

The servants had nothing to add to what Birkett had already told Timothy. They had been about to sit

down at table when the explosion occurred. It had not been particularly loud, but it had shaken the kitchen window, and Birkett and the groom had run out, followed by the two women.

Timothy ordered tea for his guest and himself, and directed that some should be taken out to Selby and the Inspector.

“Now what was all that about a knife?” asked the Colonel. “I suppose I understood you over the ‘phone?” Timothy told the story in detail. “But why should anybody want to harm you?” the Chief Constable demanded. “You weren’t a menace to the village in any way, were you?”

“Not to the village as such—at least, I think not, unless they were all involved in it.”

“Involved in what?”

“Lifting the lead from the church roof and selling it.”

“You don’t mean that was a local job?”

“I think it was engineered by Sir Ganymede Trogett and, although I’m quite certain the vicar wasn’t involved in the plot, I do think he has his suspicions about an anonymous gift of money—quite a bit of money, I gather—which came to him after the deed was done.”

“And you really think Trogett has made two attempts to lay you out? It’s incredible!”

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s completely amoral, I would say, and you never know what that type will get up to. They don’t even stop to weigh up the risks, as an ordinary run-of-the-mill criminal will do. They just do whatever comes into their heads, being totally unable to distinguish right from wrong. I mean, look at all that nonsense about the silver.”

“He sounds like a criminal lunatic to me. Well, we’ll see what Selby has to say about the accident to the

car. Certainly, a car left all on its own in a garage doesn't just explode for no reason."

Selby's report, made an hour later, outside the wrecked garage, was unequivocal.

"Small bomb underneath the driver's seat, sir. I have found enough of the container to establish the fact. A home-made bomb, sir, of the type that any bloody-minded little thug could put together."

"So now we know where we are," said the Chief Constable. "Any chance of fingerprints, Inspector?"

"They wouldn't do you any good," said Timothy. "If my hunch is right, they won't be on record, and you can hardly go round the village of Parsons Purity taking everybody's dabs."

"But you're pretty sure it was Trogett, aren't you?"

"I don't know. It seems the sort of daft trick he might have thought of, but I've nothing to go on if actual proof is wanted. I left the car in his drive while I was staying at his place, so I suppose anybody in the village could have got at it. In fact, if it hadn't been for the incident of the knife, I don't suppose I would dream of connecting him with this business of blowing up the car. Actually, in many ways, I have rather a soft spot for the old scoundrel."

"You call him an old scoundrel, sir?" said the Inspector.

"Too strong a term, perhaps. He's a prize scrounger, and, if a neighbour of his is to be believed, a bit of a thief."

"And the incident, as you call it, of the knife, sir? What would that have been?"

"Well, *somebody* came into my room while I was staying at his house. I woke up, and that, I suppose, startled whoever it was, so that the person made a get-away, but left the knife behind. Of course, it need not have been Trogett or one of his servants. It could have

been a burglar. It could also have been an attempt to murder Trogett himself. I heard later that I was given the room he himself usually occupied."

"Yes, I see. Well, now that we know somebody planted a home-made bomb in your car, I think we must get in touch with the police at Cranthorne Minster and ask them to look into things at their end.

Meanwhile, of course, we shall have to do the same here. We can't be certain that the bomb wasn't planted in the car *after* you got back from Parsons Purity."

"Trogett was to have come with me, you know. He asked for a lift into London, but changed his mind when he heard that we were to be joined by another passenger."

"Oh? Who was that?" asked the Chief Constable.

"This Mrs. Stretton whom I met in—in connection with my work on the church roof. She also asked for a lift into London. She had to see her lawyers."

"And she came with you in your car?"

"Yes. I gave her a lift, we had lunch together *en route*, and then I put her down where she asked me to."

"And where was that?"

"In Trinity John Street, opposite the offices of Starr, Starr, Beacon, and Prancett."

"Would she have had any chance to tamper with the car, sir?" asked the Inspector.

"Not on the journey, certainly. While the car was standing in Trogett's drive, anybody in the village, as I think I've told you, could have played Old Harry with it if they so desired."

"Yes, well, we'll do our best at this end, then, and get things moving at the other. You're insured, of course, sir?"

"Oh, yes, like everybody else, but I wonder what view the insurance company will take? They can't often be asked to pay out on a car which has been busted by

a home-made bomb. You don't think it was a kid's trick, meant just as a piece of mischief, do you?"

"We shall keep that in mind as a possibility, of course, but, taken in conjunction with the incident of the knife . . ."

"And a fairly spirited attempt to throw me off a ladder. I'd forgotten about that until now." He described how he and Frimley had climbed the church tower.

"So Trogett could have had nothing to do with that," said the Chief Constable, "could he?"

"No, he couldn't. I rather suspected that Frimley had been up to tricks, but, of course, some ladders in a narrow space do tend to pull away from the wall, I suppose."

"Frimley," said the Inspector, taking down the name. "And you say he's one of the churchwardens, sir?"

"Yes. So he may have been mixed up with the theft of the lead, you know."

"What lead would that have been, then, sir?"

Timothy told him. The Chief Constable, who had already heard all about the theft of the lead, winked out a piece of gravel from the path with the toe of an elegant shoe, and listened moodily.

"I've a good mind," said Timothy, at the end, "to go back to Parsons Purity with his wretched silver, and confront Trogett, and ask him what he thinks he's playing at."

"You would be ill-advised, sir," said the Inspector. "I should leave it in the hands of the police."

"You'll get some sort of reaction to your letter," put in the Colonel. "Wait and see what he has to say about that."

The reaction, when it came, was not from Sir Ganymede. It came in the form of a telephone message

from Phisbe's headquarters at three o'clock on the following day.

"Is that you, Mr. Herring? Coningsby here."

"Speaking."

"I've got a lady here, sir, just come from Parsons Purity. She wants your home address, but, naturally, I couldn't let her have it without consulting you. It's a Mrs. Stretton."

"What's she look like?"

"Tallish—about five foot seven—dark brown hair, very dark blue eyes, very nice hands, sir, good speaking voice, dressed in . . ."

"All right. Keep her with you. I'll be there in a couple of hours, with any luck."

There was a fast train at half-past three. He caught it, took a taxi from Waterloo, and was at the Phisbe offices at just before five. Jane Stretton and Coningsby, the young man who performed such secretarial jobs as Timothy delegated to him, had been taking tea in the visitors' room, a charming apartment which overlooked Kensington Gardens on the opposite side of the road.

"Good afternoon, sir," said young Coningsby, getting up. "A cup of tea, sir? I'll call down to the kitchen for a fresh supply." He went out of the room—a tactful gesture, since it was possible to communicate with the kitchen by speaking tube. Jane Stretton also got up. She had what Timothy, who, at times, lacked chivalry, called her wild woman look.

"Oh, Tim!" she said. "What am I going to do?"

"Sit down," said Timothy, "and less of the Mrs. Siddons. Now, what is it?"

"It's Ganymede. Something's happened to him."

"And not before time! Has somebody at last waited for him in a dark alley?"

"Oh, Tim! How on earth did you know? It was only this morning I heard of it. He's dead."

"*What?* I don't believe it!" He was appalled, but did not intend that this should be too obvious.

"It's true! It's either suicide or murder. I don't know what to do! It's terrible! I don't know what to do!"

Timothy recovered himself.

"That doesn't sound like you," he said lightly. "And suicide doesn't sound like Troggett. Tell me about it."

"He'd come to see me, and, a bit later on, he was killed." She began to cry. Timothy, feeling cold-blooded, sat and looked at her. Then he asked calmly,

"Why have you come to London?"

"I didn't know what else to do. You'll have to help me. I need you! I need somebody badly."

"Why?" His matter-of-factness had the effect he intended. She dabbed at her eyes, blew her nose, and looked at him angrily. Women who have been weeping seldom appear at their best, he thought, with dispassionate distaste. Their noses turn shiny and red, their mascara runs, and, from a censorious, unsympathetic standpoint, they look a mess.

"I am bound to be suspected of killing him," she said flatly, still eyeing him with angry dislike.

"Oh? Why?"

"*Please* don't keep asking why!" There was a tap on the door. "Here's your tea. Please send your young man away. I've had to make polite conversation until I feel like screaming! Send him away! I don't want him to see me like this."

"Right." He went to the door and took the tray from Coningsby. "You can cut off home now," he said. "I'll deal with Mrs. Stretton's complaint. It's still to do with Parsons Purity." The young man went off thankfully, and Timothy carried the tray to a small table, set it down, seated himself, and poured out a cup of tea. "Any more for you?" he asked. She shook her head and took out a powder compact with which to repair the ravages her

tears had wrought. "Now, then, tell me all you want to," he went on. "Sorry to use the dirty word again, but *why* should you be suspected of killing Troggett?"

"We had a fearful row. Trudi heard it."

"Well, fearful rows don't lead automatically to murder. What was it all about?"

"He was trying to blackmail me. You know I went to the lawyers? Well, Christopher has left me all his money. I had no idea he was such a wealthy man, but apparently Ganymede knew. He tried to blackmail me into marrying him."

"But—forgive the question—are you, so to speak, blackmailable?"

"There's the boy."

"Oh, come, now!"

"He threatened to maim him!"

"My *dear* girl! You didn't fall for a silly bluff like that?"

"I don't know. Ganymede was quite without moral sense. I told him what I thought of him. I told him I knew that Mrs. King is his daughter by Mrs. Prynne, and that John Hemsley, at the lodge, is his son by the daughter of that poor old woman who keeps the gate. She died—the daughter—when young John was born."

"But he wouldn't mind your telling him all this. It was common property, wasn't it? I mean, he told me such things himself. He wasn't in the least ashamed of them. And I expect lots of people had fearful rows with him. There's nothing for you to worry about. I had a couple of scores to settle with him myself, as a matter of fact, so perhaps it's just as well that I wasn't in the neighbourhood when he was taken off. You remember that business of the Commando knife? Oh, no, I didn't tell you about it. Then, since I came home, my car blew up. Luckily for me, I wasn't in it at the time, otherwise I, too, would be a spent force."

"So *that's* why he changed his mind about coming to London with you? He meant to kill you!"

"It looks a bit like it, I think. Now, here's what we'll do. First, I'm going to take you home."

"To *your* home? Oh, Tim, thank you ever so much! You don't know . . ."

"Hold your horses, and don't jump to unwarranted conclusions. I'm going to take you to *your* home. It will never do for you to appear to be running away. The police will be fully into their stride by now, and it won't look at all good for one of their suspects to be missing."

"I can't go back! I can't face it!"

"You can and you will go back, and I doubt whether there will be much for you to face. Half a minute! I rather think there's a railway time-table in that bookcase over there, unless—no, I know! I'll hire a car and drive you. That way, you won't have to sit in a railway compartment and submit to being eyed by the curious."

"Do I look as bad as all that?" She managed to smile.

"I must admit that I've seen you look handsomer. Stay here, while I go and telephone. No nonsense, mind! You've asked for help, and you're jolly well going to get it. I suppose—just to keep the record straight—you *didn't* kill Trogett, did you?"

"You know I didn't!" Her voice held a warning note of approaching hysteria.

"I know you didn't," he repeated, gazing thoughtfully at her. "How exactly, was he killed?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

"All right. No need to wake the baby. You stay put until I come back. I won't be long. Keep your chin up, my dear."

She turned her face away and began to cry again. Timothy studied her averted head, and then went out

to the telephone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Passing Bell for a Wicked Baronet

Jane Stretton's house, by the time she and Timothy reached it at nine o'clock that evening, was deserted. Trudi had left a note: *I am afraid. I have flee to my friends.*

"I can't stay here alone," said Jane. Timothy agreed with her. She was in no state to be left in an empty house.

"Whom can we get? Or where could you go?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"What about the Frimleys?"

"I couldn't go there. Miss Frimley wouldn't take me."

"I'll tell you what, then. How about getting hold of Mrs. King? I'm sure King wouldn't mind if she came and spent the night here."

"Tim, it isn't fair to ask anybody. No one will want to come here. By this time, everybody in the village will know about my row with Ganymede. Trudi is certain to have spread it about. That means the police. Nobody wants to get mixed up with the police."

"Then there's only one thing for it."

"Tim, will you really stay?"

"No, of course I won't. But I *will* ring up the *Nesting Pheasant* and get them to give you a room."

"I'd rather stay here than go there. Oh, Tim, I couldn't go there, with all the talk there's bound to be!"

"All right. I'll try Miss Frimley first, and then Mrs. King. Do you want to come along with me to see them?"

"Oh, Tim, please stay! You're not married, are you? I mean, it won't concern anybody else."

"That's all *you* know! No, no. I'm very sorry." As he said this, there was a knock on the door. "That may be the police," he added, looking at her frightened face. "All right, I'll answer it. You sit down. You look groggy. Don't forget that you're not bound to answer any questions." He went to the front door and opened it. Miss Frimley stood there.

"I've had Godfrey on sentry-go, on and off, these last six hours," she announced. "Glad you've brought the stupid gal back home. What's she mean by running away like that? Worst thing she could do in the circumstances, whether she's guilty or not. You've heard about Ganymede, of course?"

"You'd better come in, Miss Frimley. Mrs. Stretton is tired and upset. She wasn't running away. She had to go to London on business, that's all."

"Well, I'm taking her home with me tonight, the silly gal. Where is she?"

"Just in there. You'll handle her gently, won't you?"

"Never handled anything gently yet, not even a day-old chick, but she can't stay here alone, and you can't stay here with her, that's perfectly obvious."

"I suggested she might put up at the hotel in Cranthorne Minster for a night or two."

"That bug-haunted pub? Not likely." She pushed past Timothy and opened the drawing-room door.

"Now, Jane, you get your nightdress, or whatever tomfoolery you wear in bed, and come with me," she said. "A nice mess you've got yourself into! Fancy

quarrelling with that idiot Ganymede on the very day he decided to get himself murdered! Whatever next, I wonder!”

This novel and illogical viewpoint made a powerful appeal to Timothy, the more so when a little of the colour came back to Jane’s face, and she even managed to smile. Miss Frimley’s last words, as the two women went out of the house, were to the effect that Trudi ought to be scalped and that Timothy had better camp out for the night in Jane’s bed, as he certainly wouldn’t be accommodated at the *Nesting Pheasant*, or anywhere else, at that time of night. As it was then barely half-past nine, Timothy disagreed with her, although he did not say so. He had no desire to have the truant *au pair* Trudi turn up at midnight and find him alone in the house—so probable a circumstance that it needed to be taken into account, for her friends, whoever they were—if any—might not be prepared to give her house-room at such short notice, or, indeed, from what he had guessed of Trudi’s character, to give her house-room at all.

As soon as Miss Frimley and Jane had shut the front gate behind them, he rang up the *Nesting Pheasant* and, after some hasty parley between the manageress and somebody else, engaged a room and drove straight to Cranthorne Minster. The bar, at that time in the evening, was crowded. The stools at the counter had been removed, and men were standing in an almost solid block between the bar and the long tables. As he had anticipated, there was only one subject of conversation. He heard a snatch and a buzz of it everywhere.

“I tell you,” bellowed a man in a dirty sweater, “the old b. asked for it! Been asking for it for years, the—old—!”

“Well, did *you* oblige ‘im?” asked a man with his back to Timothy. There was a cheerful guffaw from the listeners.

“Wouldn’t have been for want of prayerfulness if I *had* obliged him,” the man replied. “If I’ve prayed once that the old sinner dropped down dead, I must ha’ done it forty thousand times. The dirty old bastard! Do his mother down for an Irish penny!”

Timothy did not know the speaker. He pushed his way to the counter, those who could do so—for the bar was jam-packed—giving him an inch or two of room—and found that Bob, behind the counter, was reinforced by a man and a woman whom he recognised as William the waiter and the girl from the reception desk. He ordered whisky.

“Busy tonight,” he remarked to Bob, who served him.

“Best thing for trade Sir G. ever done was to get himself done in,” said Bob.

“Nothing became him in his life like the leaving of it, eh?”

“You can say that again.” He turned his back while he produced two nips from an upended bottle of whisky.

“How did it happen? I’ve heard nothing yet, except that he was killed,” said Timothy, accepting the siphon which Bob pushed towards him.

“Can’t stop to tell you now, sir. Later, when we close.”

The bar was still pretty full when the first of the warning bells went at twenty-five past ten, but it went unheeded and a number of the customers, ten times as many as usual, took advantage of the extra drinking-up time. At last, by dint of cajolery, pleading, and, as a last resort, a mild form of chucking-out, Bob and William got the bar clear except for an almost impenetrable fog of

tobacco smoke and a vast number of empty pots and glasses.

"I'll give you a hand," said Timothy. William had retired to get the dining-room ready for breakfast, that necessary chore having been postponed because of his commitments in the bar, and the reception clerk had not seen it as part of her duties to help with the clearing up, so Bob was left on his own, a situation which suited Timothy. If, at the end of such a hectic evening, Bob had not been able to winnow the wheat from the chaff, he must be both deaf and stupid. Somewhere, among the backwash of argument and speculation, something that made sense must have emerged. Timothy went round collecting glasses, pint pots, and ashtrays, and bided his time.

"Had your supper, Mr. Herring?" asked Bob, as he came back from putting away the broom with which he had swept the floor. "That'll do till Mrs. Crunch comes and scrubs up in the morning. I'm grateful for your help, sir."

"I had dinner on my way down, but I could do with a bit of bread and cheese, if there's any going," said Timothy.

"Ah, so could I, too an' all. Better still, why not let's both have a pint and bring it in the kitchen? There's a nice bit of cold boiled bacon, with some cold broad beans, and there won't be anybody in there asseptin' just us two. William and the Reception don't sleep in, and the missus ate hers in the dining-room, same as usual, and if she has a bedtime snack it'll be in her den." He drew a couple of pints and led the way to the kitchen. Over the meal he told Timothy, soberly and factually, all that he knew about Sir Ganymede's death. This involved the recounting of certain episodes in Sir Ganymede's life, none of which was to the baronet's credit, and most of which Timothy knew already, and

led to the voiced conclusion: "Of course, so far as I'm concerned, sir, a lot of this be nothen more than hearsay."

"Quite," said Timothy. "I appreciate that. There's no doubt it was murder, and not suicide, then?"

"Inquest'll have to settle that, sir. Tuesday. Then maybe they'll find a case for the magistrates, and maybe they won't. But, from all I yur—and that's plenty, and I don't mean only tonight—nobody aren't going to be pleased if anybody hereabouts is had up for the doing of it."

Timothy went up to his room when the meal was over, and sorted out what he had gathered. Sir Ganymede had been found dead in his own rock garden. He had been stabbed. That much, so far, seemed to be common knowledge. The rest was surmise, with regard both to the weapon which had been used and the identity of the murderer. There were a number of suspects and each had his following, and women's names (according to Bob) had also been mentioned. Among these were Jane Stretton and Trogett's housekeeper, the taciturn, devil-devoted, inscrutable Mrs. Prynne, but nobody appeared to think that this was a woman's crime. The ladies were too fond of the old buster to kill him, it was said.

Of the men, two were obvious suspects. Pimm had lost and (so the talk went) had gone on losing some of his rarest and choicest rock plants. The fact that the baronet had been killed in his own rock garden lent a certain amount of colour to the theory that the squire had been caught in the act of stealing, and that Pimm had followed him home and killed him in the other act of planting out or dibbing in his ill-gotten treasures.

The other school of thought favoured the verger Elias Bagge, although (as their opponents were not slow to point out) Bagge was too old for the job and, in

any case, would have been very unlikely to go out of the town as far as Parsons Purity, even for the satisfaction of slaughtering the man whose car had run down and killed Mrs. Bagge. There was also only slight evidence, so far as was known, that Bagge had objected at all strongly to being deprived of his partner. There had never been much love lost between them, it appeared, the wife having disliked her husband's fixation on the old minster, and he having complained for many years about the nature and results of her cooking.

One or two minor candidates also had been put forward for the rôle of murderer. The market gardener Rickaby, in annual conflict with Sir Ganymede over the sale of peas and raspberries, found one or two ready accusers, and there were even a few long-odds punters who opted for the churchwarden King. Their view was that King had long disliked the squire, whose illegitimate daughter he had probably been talked, if not forced, into marrying, so that, suddenly, the opportunity presenting itself, he had been carried away by pent-up bitterness and had wiped out the score.

There were even wilder guesses. Among the more improbable suspects figured Mrs. King, hoping to inherit something on her natural father's death, and old Lizzie Hemsley the gatekeeper, in collusion with her grandson John. Even the vicar (so the *habitués* of the bar had muttered) could count upon being suspected. The unusual aspect of the matter was that the accusers of each of the suspects were wholly on the side of the murderer.

Timothy was both amused and appalled by this. To his urban mind and lack of parochial enthusiasm, if a murder had been committed the murderer had to be found and, when found, he had to be dealt with according to the law. The equally simple code of

Parsons Purity seemed to be that nothing should be done to punish whoever had managed to rid the village of bad rubbish, no matter who he might turn out to be.

The general feeling certainly settled one thing—there was no longer any need for Jane Stretton to shrink from appearing in public. Merely by being placed on the list of suspected persons she had white-washed herself in the eyes of what she had thought of—probably mistakenly, as it turned out—as an unfriendly community.

Timothy remained awake for some time after he had gone to bed. If the baronet had been the object of such general hatred, was it not a possibility, he wondered, that there was another needle in the haystack besides the obvious and not-so-obvious suspects so far named? He remembered the unknown suppliant in the bar, and fell asleep with the problem still on his mind; his last conscious thought was that, first thing in the morning, he would call on Mr. Winterbottom.

He found the vicar, with his round, black, clerical hat already upon his head, about to set forth on some mission. He greeted Timothy with enthusiasm.

“Ah, my dear Herring! I heard from Miss Frimley that you were again in our midst. How good of you to come! She seemed to think that you had occupied Mrs. Stretton’s house for the night, so I went along to talk to you, only to find, to my deep disappointment, that the bird had flown. Still, here you are, and I cannot say how delighted I am to see you. You are already aware of the strange and dreadful circumstances in which we find ourselves? Poor, poor Trogett! Cut off without any chance of repentance! All his sins upon him! Could any frightful fate be more disastrous?”

Timothy could think of a great many frightful fates which, in his view, could have been infinitely more

disastrous, so he grunted in what he trusted was a regretful and reverent manner without committing himself to a verbal expression of opinion, and then said,

"I really came to you for details. I heard some very garbled accounts at the *Nesting Pheasant* last night, so I'd rather like to know the truth."

"Details? Well, as to those, I fear we are all in the dark. The body has been placed in the mortuary at Swanswater, and an inspector has been pursuing some enquiries here in the village. The inquest is fixed for Tuesday morning. That is really as much as I know, except for one or two bizarre features mentioned to me by Sir Ganymede's manservant, who happened to discover the body."

"Bizarre features?"

"Well, so they seemed to me. A number of rock plants were lying scattered on and around the body."

"He was known to steal plants from Mr. Pimm, you know. Don't you think perhaps he'd been on the prowl, and the murderer struck him down before he could put the things in the ground?"

"That might account for the plants being scattered *around* the body, but some of the plants were actually *on* it. That seems strange to me. Then there was the dog."

"Yes? What did the dog do?"

"Nothing. It was dead."

"Whose dog was it?"

"I have no idea, neither had Mrs. Prynne."

"How does she come into it?"

"Quite naturally. She was the first person Castle ran for, when he discovered that his master was dead."

"Oh, yes, of course. But you yourself haven't seen her?"

“Well, I went round as soon as Castle came for me, but Mrs. Prynne was lying in a darkened room, prostrate with shock, so, after speaking a few words of consolation from the doorway, I judged it best to leave her to herself. She was very much attached to Sir Ganymede, and had been his constant companion for many years.”

“Yes,” said Timothy, “in fact, I believe she had a child by him. Mrs. King, wasn’t it?”

“It was before my time, well before my time. I know nothing of it except by hearsay, and hearsay is not, you will admit, an infallible guide.”

“Less so than usual, in this case, one would imagine.”

“You refer, no doubt, to Mrs. King’s incredible physical beauty. I have thought the same thing myself,” said the vicar, hastily. “But, to return to our subject, I fear the police will have no option but to arrest the unfortunate Pimm.”

“Let’s hope he’s got a cast-iron defence, then. I like Pimm, and I don’t believe he’s a murderer.”

“But the rock plants and the dog!”

“My dear vicar, only a madman or a supreme egoist would leave his trademarks to that extent, and Pimm, I am certain, is neither. Where will the inquest be held?”

“At the Coroner’s Court in Swanswater. I shall not attend it. There would be no point whatever in my doing so.”

“I don’t suppose there will be much excitement, anyway, unless the police think they have made out a case, but I think I’ll go, all the same. Did you, by the way, hear that somebody planted half-a-dozen pieces of valuable silverware in my luggage before I left Parsons Purity last time?”

“Yes. When Castle came to see me, he brought poor Trogett’s unopened letters with him. Among them was

one from you.”

“Has the Inspector seen the letters?”

“Yes, of course. I thought it advisable to turn everything over to him. How strange of Trogett to have made you a present of the silver without saying anything beforehand! I can quite understand why you wrote in the tone you did, although it seems regrettable now.”

Timothy did not think so, and said nothing.

It was twelve miles by road to Swanswater. It was an Assize town of some fourteen thousand inhabitants and was on the bank of a slow-moving river. It possessed two hotels, both of them in the high street, and Timothy chose the one which was the nearer to the court where the inquest was to be held. He garaged his car in the yard at the back, bespoke a table for lunch, and crossed the road to the Coroner’s Court.

The public gallery was filling up, but he got a seat. There was a time of waiting, and then the Coroner’s Officer showed the jury to their places. The Coroner’s Clerk and the doctor who was going to provide the medical evidence seated themselves on either side of the Coroner’s desk, and the witnesses were given seats at a central table so that their profiles would be turned towards the Coroner and their backs towards the jury. When all were settled, the Coroner’s Officer called upon all manner of persons to stand, the Coroner entered and took his place, and the proceedings opened with the call-over of the jury and their being sworn in. They were then invited to sit down, and the Coroner, a tall, cadaverous man with a lugubrious expression and a habit of licking his lips at the end of every sentence, addressed them in melancholy, measured tones.

Timothy had looked forward to hearing him outline the facts relating to Sir Ganymede’s death, but these were confined to a couple of sentences. Sir Ganymede

Troggett had been killed at about six o'clock on the evening of Friday last. The Coroner would call upon the doctor who had been sent for when the death had been discovered, but before the doctor gave his evidence the court would seek to establish the identity of the deceased.

Mrs. Prynne was called, and Timothy learned that her first name was Marcella. She was sworn, and her evidence was brief and, so far as Timothy was concerned, unimportant.

"Your name is Marcella Prynne?"

"Yes."

"You acted as housekeeper to Sir Ganymede Troggett at Troggett Hall in the village of Parsons Purity?"

"I did."

"You have seen the body of the deceased?"

"I have."

"And you identify it as the body of your late employer, Sir Ganymede Troggett?"

"I do."

"Will you tell the court when you last saw him alive?"

"It would have been at half-past two on Friday afternoon."

"No later than that?"

"No. I usually saw him at about half-past four, when I took him his tea, but he did not take tea last Friday."

"Was there any reason for that?"

"Yes. He told me that he was going over to Mr. Pimm's rock garden to steal some plants."

"He actually told you this? Were you not very much surprised?"

"No. It was a thing he often told me he was going to do. I thought nothing of it at all."

The Coroner made a note and then asked the jury whether they wished to question the witness. One of them did.

“Did this Mr. Pimm *know* as the gentleman stole his plants?”

“I am not sure that such a question ought to be put at this juncture,” said the Coroner. He looked at the Inspector.

“We would prefer not to have it answered, sir,” said the Inspector.

“Very proper, at this stage. Mr. Winslade, would you care to ask a question of the witness?”

Timothy had been wondering who Mr. Winslade was representing, for he had decided that he was a solicitor. From his emphatic denial that he desired to put a question to the witness, Timothy now concluded that Winslade represented Mr. Pimm. The next witness was Castle, who testified to the finding of the body. He was asked no questions, and did not get a chance of referring to the scattered rock plants and the dead dog. His attempt to introduce these into his evidence was cut short ruthlessly.

“Call Doctor Cleghorn,” said the Coroner. The doctor was called and sworn.

“Your name is Thomas Cleghorn?”

“Yes.”

“You live at the Old Deanery, Cranthorne Minster?”

“Yes.”

“You are in private practice and, in addition to the degree of Medical Doctor, you are also a Bachelor of Science?”

“That is so.”

“You were called by telephone to Troggett Hall, in the village of Parsons Purity, on the evening of Friday last. Were you the late Sir Ganymede Troggett’s regular medical attendant?”

“So far as he had one, yes. By that I mean I had not seen him since he asked me to put him on my list in 1947.”

“Will you tell the court what happened after you had received the telephone call?”

“I was almost at the end of my evening surgery, but the caller said that the matter was extremely urgent, so I asked my receptionist to warn anybody who was still waiting in the surgery that it might be a considerable time before I could be in attendance. Then I got out my car and drove to Trogett Hall. There Mrs. Prynn met me and told me she was certain Sir Ganymede was dead. She took me out to a very large rock garden at the back of the house and I examined the body which she showed me. This was at just after eight o’clock. I concluded that death had occurred not more than a few hours—possibly as little as two hours—before my arrival.”

“Will you tell the court how you arrived at that conclusion, Doctor?”

“Certainly. Apart from the fact that *rigor mortis* had not set in, which indicated that the deceased had not been dead for more than, at the topmost limit, seven hours, the body temperature showed very little fall from normal. The body was clothed in vest, shirt, drawers, jacket, and trousers, but the afternoon had been only moderately warm. On average, a body so clothed and in the open air on such a day might be expected to cool at the rate of about two and a half degrees an hour up to the end of the first six hours. I took a reading, and estimated that the normal body temperature of ninety-eight point four degrees had dropped to ninety-two point nine. From this I deduced that death had taken place about two hours previous to my examination of the body.”

At this point a juror asked whether it was the usual practice to take the temperature of a dead body. The doctor replied that, in this particular case, it had seemed highly desirable to try to fix the time of death.

"Will you explain that, please?" said the Coroner.

"It was obvious to me that, in this particular case, death had been the result of violence deliberately inflicted."

The Inspector looked anxiously at the Coroner, who, catching his eye, said magisterially,

"The last two words will be ignored by the jury and will be deleted from the notebooks of the Press. Now, Doctor, will you tell us how, in your opinion, death came about in this case?"

"Death was caused by some sharp, thin instrument which had penetrated the heart."

"Did you see any such instrument?"

"No. I did not. There was no sign of such a thing either in or near the body."

"Thank you, Doctor. That is all. If the jury have no more questions, I shall adjourn the inquest for a fortnight, as I understand that the police have not yet concluded their investigations. To enable them to do this, and to permit of the burial of the body, I shall now issue a Coroner's Warrant. The court is adjourned."

"Well!" said one incensed juror to another, as they left the courtroom. "What a beastly swindle! It's obvious we ought to have been allowed to bring in a verdict of willful murder! That Coroner doesn't know his job!"

Out in the street Timothy recognised Pimm. He waited for some minutes, seeing him in conference with the solicitor who had been in court. When the lawyer left him, Timothy went up to Pimm and touched his arm.

“Hullo, Mr. Herring. You weren’t in court for the inquest, were you?” asked Pimm. He looked haggard.

“I most certainly was. Come and have some lunch. I’ve got a table. What’s all this about rockery plants and dead dogs?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Case for the Magistrates

"The vicar tipped me off," said Pimm. "That's why I had a solicitor in court. They'll get me up in front of the beaks, I reckon."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. At the resumed inquest the police will have to present a case, the jury will throw it out, and that will be that."

"I wish I was as certain as you, sir. I mean, I know I didn't do it, much as I'd have liked to, many's the time, but how am I going to prove it?"

"*Had* he been that day to steal your plants?"

"No, he hadn't, but, there again, how can I prove that?"

"Get an expert on the job. He'll find out whether those plants could have come from your garden, surely?"

"There a'nt no bigger expert than what I am myself," said Pimm, with mournful pride, "and I be certain sure the squire hasn't pinched from me this last—oh, I don't know how long."

"Whose was the dead dog, I wonder?"

"What's it matter about the dead dog?"

"Look here, Mr. Pimm, I'm certain you're not the man they want. That means somebody has tried to frame you. That person is the murderer."

"Yes, I reckon so. How does it help? I can't see where to start."

"Give me the address of your solicitor. I want to talk to him. And now come and have your lunch. Cheer up, man. The truth is somewhere about. We've got to find it, that's all."

The solicitor, in common with his kind, was extremely cautious.

"We shall have to await the verdict at the resumed inquest before we can make a move of any sort," he said. "I agree with you that my client is innocent, but it might not be in his interests to stir things up until matters reach a later stage than this. You see, I think he's lying when he says those plants weren't stolen from his garden. I'm pretty certain they were. The only thing is, I don't believe they were stolen on the day of Sir Ganymede's death."

"How do you mean, exactly?"

"My own reading of the matter is that the murderer dug up, out of Sir Ganymede's rockery, plants which had previously been stolen from Pimm, and scattered them on and around the body."

"Do you know what happened to those plants, and also to the body of the dog?"

"No, I do not. I assume that both have been disposed of. Mr. Herring, you cannot help my client by interfering at this juncture. Please be guided by me."

Timothy drove back to Parsons Purity and called on Mrs. Prynne, who, he had ascertained, was still living at Trogett Hall. She herself opened the door to him.

"I heard you'd come back," she said. "I thought I saw you at the inquest. He's to be buried on Thursday."

"In the churchyard here?"

"Where else? He'll sleep with his fathers. There's a family vault."

"And what are you going to do?"

"I'm provided for. Sit down. I'll make a cup of tea."

They drank it in silence. Mrs. Prynne's demeanour had never been less encouraging to conversation, Timothy thought. She carried the tray out, came back, and sat opposite him again. Timothy decided that she was now prepared to be told why he had come.

"I wondered," he said, "what happened to those rock plants, you know."

Mrs. Prynne did not pretend that she could not follow his train of thought.

"I planted them again," she said. "It is what Sir Ganymede would have wished. But the police, with their usual high-handedness, made me take them up again, and they were impounded."

"And the carcass of the dog?"

"I told Castle to take it away and bury it, but it seems that the police claimed that, too. Why, I cannot think."

"Was it—er—decomposed?"

"I hope not, for their sake." She smiled sardonically. "I didn't take much notice of *that* carcass. It was the other one I gave my attention to."

"Yes, of course. Mrs. Prynne, did you know that Sir Ganymede—I think it was he; I hope I am not doing him an injustice—made two attempts on my life?"

"I wouldn't put it past him. He knew you'd guessed what had happened to the lead off the church roof, you see. But that's all over now. Except for what he gave the vicar, the money is in the safe. I've written a letter. The lawyers will give you what's there. Then you and your Society can put the roof back on again. I don't know how much more you'll have to find. That's your affair."

"How did Mr. Winterbottom react to this very dubious transaction?" Timothy asked.

“He was troubled in conscience, but he’d commit murder for the sake of his Youth Club.”

“Good Lord!” said Timothy, startled. “You don’t think he did, do you?”

“God moves in a mysterious way, and so do some that call themselves His servants. One thing I do know. I shall never again put *my* head under the church roof, lead or no lead.”

“Not even under the roof of the crypt?” asked Timothy before he could stop himself. He wished he had thought, before uttering these words, for Mrs. Prynn turned on him a glare of such bitter dislike that he soon made some excuse and showed himself out. He did not look back, but he felt her snake’s eyes like augers boring into his skull. He crossed the churchyard and went to call on the vicar, but Mr. Winterbottom was out. He returned to the hired car and drove to Frimley’s house, hoping to have a word with Jane Stretton. Again he was disappointed. Miss Frimley and Mrs. Stretton had taken luggage with them and hired Jack Benson’s car to take them to Swanswater railway station. Likely they were going up to London, the maidservant thought. Timothy returned to the *Nesting Pheasant*.

The adjourned inquest followed the pattern of the preliminary hearing, except that more evidence was offered. The most striking came from a forensic expert named Sir Anthony Mudeford.

“You examined the body of the deceased, Sir Ganymede Trogett, the day following his death?”

“I did.”

“Will you please tell the court what you found—in the simplest possible language.”

“Very well. I found that the deceased had sustained a stab-wound which had pierced the heart, causing almost instant death.”

“Can you add anything to that?”

“Yes, I can. The wound had been inflicted from the front. That is to say, the blow had been delivered by somebody standing face to face with the recipient.”

“Could the wound have been self-inflicted?”

“No, it could not. The only way in which that could have been done would be by the deceased falling on to the point of the weapon.”

“Was not that a possibility in this case, then?”

“In view of the evidence which we have already heard, I think not.”

“To what evidence do you specifically refer?”

“To the evidence of the Inspector of police and that of Dr. Cleghorn. They have stated that no weapon was found. In view of the nature of the wound, it would have been quite impossible for the subject to have disposed of the weapon before he died.”

The jury brought in a verdict of murder by persons unknown.

“Persons?” said Timothy to Pimm, in the bar of the *Nesting Pheasant* that evening.

“I had a word with the foreman,” said Pimm, “when it was all over. He’s starting up a little rockery in his front garden. He’s bought one of they little bungalows out on the hill between here and Swanswater Splash, and, finding out as I were an expert, and him having to do something with the shoring up of his frontage owing to the slope of the hill, he come up to me after the adjournment, and we got friendly like. So when today’s little picnic was over, I got hold of him, and asked him how they come to their findings, and he says as he pointed out to them as it were only common sense. He pointed out what they could all see when they heard what he had to say, and that was as no man in his senses is going to stand still while somebody stabs him through the heart. There must have been an

accomplice as was holding squire's arms behind him while the murderer got to work from in front."

"As simple as that!" said Timothy. "Oh, dear! There was I, thinking, in my romantic, schoolboy fashion, that the only way to account for the thing was that poor old Trogett must have been fighting a duel!"

"Folks don't fight duels nowadays. It's either fists or broken bottles, seems to me."

"Anyway, you're in the clear, I should think."

"How do you make that out? The police have got their eye on me all right, and so soon as they go to find out who they reckon t'other chap was, him as helped me, I've had it."

Timothy went home on the following morning. After lunch he wrote to the vicar to tell him that the next meeting of the Phisbe committee was almost due. He asked Winterbottom to let him have a note of what had been decided about the repairs to the roof of the church, and concluded by writing that he would be greatly obliged if he could be informed of any matters arising out of Sir Ganymede's death.

The vicar's reply came two days later. The parish (Timothy understood from the letter that this meant the vicar himself) was prepared to advance two hundred pounds towards the cost of a new roof, and Mrs. Prynne was willing to contribute also, so long as Phisbe would agree to find the rest of the money and would engage a contractor and see to all the business side of the operation. Pimm had been arrested and had been brought before the magistrates. The vicar enclosed a cutting from the local paper, which had reported the proceedings at the magistrates' court. Timothy read this with the closest interest and a considerable degree of concern.

After the preliminaries of obtaining from the defendant his name, the charge had been read to him

and he had pleaded Not Guilty. Prosecuting on behalf of the police, Counsel had repeated the facts of Sir Ganymede's death much as they had been given at the inquest, and had then proceeded:

"It is the submission of the police that the defendant, of his willful act, brought about the death of the said Sir Ganymede Trogett by stabbing him through the heart with a weapon which will be produced in evidence. Call Marcella Prynne."

As Timothy read the résumé of Mrs. Prynne's evidence he began by scowling and finished up by whistling dolefully. Mrs. Prynne repeated the assertion she had made. Her employer had given her the afternoon off from two-thirty until six, saying that he was going over to Horace Pimm's house to steal some of a new consignment of rock plants which had been delivered to Pimm on the previous day, and that he would not be in for tea."

"Was that unusual?" asked the chairman of the magistrates.

"Not when he was going over to Mr. Pimm's," the witness replied.

"This had happened before, then?"

"Oh, yes, a fair number of times."

"I see. Carry on, Mr. Mumble."

Counsel, whose clear young voice belied his unfortunate name, then asked:

"How many times, would you say?"

"Oh, a matter of twenty times, maybe," the witness replied, in a tone of complete indifference.

"Had the defendant ever complained about this practice?"

"Of course he had. It got worse after Sir Ganymede killed his dog."

At this point the defendant's solicitor got to his feet, but subsided again as his opposite number, the

young barrister, said smoothly,

"Never mind about the dog. Just answer my questions. You left the hall at two-thirty. At what time did you return?"

"At six, as I'd been told to do."

"And what did you do then?"

"I set about seeing to the dinner."

"So that you did not have cause to communicate in any way with your employer?"

"No. I never bothered him unless it was really necessary."

"Did you go into the rock garden that evening?"

"Not until Castle called me out there."

"Why did he call you?"

"To ask what was best to be done."

"With Sir Ganymede's body, do you mean?"

"I suppose so. I said what about getting the doctor and the police, and that's what we did."

"Thank you, Mrs. Prynne. Call Herbert Castle."

The general factotum of Sir Ganymede's household presented himself as a mental image to Timothy. He saw an under-sized, middle-aged man with the mouth of a Uriah Heep and the eyes of a weasel. He underestimated him.

"Your name is Herbert Castle?"

"Yes. Ask me mum, if you don't believe me."

"Please confine yourself to answering the questions," advised the Bench. "Your mother is not a material witness."

"The answer is yes, I be Herbert Castle. This without prejudice, mark you."

"I am prejudiced to this extent," said the chairman, "that I will not tolerate impertinence in this court. You will answer questions according to the terms of the oath you have taken, and without offering gratuitous

and inapposite remarks. Now give your best attention to Counsel.”

“I want you to cast your mind back to the afternoon of last Friday. When did you last see your employer alive?” asked Mr. Mumble.

“That weren’t in the afternoon.”

“In the morning, then.”

“Let’s see now. I reckon it woulda been around half-past ten.”

“Did he send for you?”

“Yes. He complained the silver wanted shining up.”

“What silver would that be?”

“Oh, all them swords and things what hang on the staircase wall.”

This reply, according to the newspaper report, had caused a stir in court (as well it might, thought Timothy, considering the nature of Sir Ganymede’s fatal wound), and the chairman of the Bench insisted upon silence in the public gallery.

“Now, Mr. Castle,” went on the prosecuting Counsel, “I want you to think carefully before you answer my next question. This is it: to what extent, if any, would it be possible for an unauthorised person to enter Trogett Hall and possess himself of one of these weapons?”

“Easiest thing in the world,” replied the witness confidently. “The front door was always left wide open all arternoon in fine weather, such as, praise God, we’ve been a-having of, so there was nothing to stop anybody walking in and helping himself to what he fancied, so fur as I can see.”

“But I understand that Sir Ganymede had a valuable collection of antique silver, apart from these weapons, although these, since I am told that some of them had antique silver hilts, would have some intrinsic

value. What about the silver vessels? Had Sir Ganymede such treasures?"

"Right enough, so he had, but the library door was always kept locked when he wasn't there, and the burglar alarm switched on. As to them swords and things, I don't reckon he give them much thought."

"I see. Well, at half-past ten, then, you were instructed to polish these weapons. What happened after that?"

"I tells Sir G. as I can't see me way clear to doing 'em that morning, but I'd 'ave a go come the follerin' day."

"Were you accustomed to telling your employer that you could not carry out his orders?"

"You got it wrong. I couldn't carry out two different lots of orders at one and the same time, now could I?"

"Do not put questions to Counsel," said the chairman.

"O.K. What I mean is, only the day before, Sir G. had told me special to muck out the pigs. 'Make your mind up,' I says to him. 'Eethers I cleans they swords, or else I mucks out they pigs,' I says, 'but I can't, nor won't, do both, it being my arternoon orf,' I says."

"And how did Sir Ganymede react to this ultimatum?"

"He cussed me."

"And then?"

"And then he says to do the mucking out and leave the polishing, so that's what I does."

"Was it customary for you and Mrs. Prynn to have the same free afternoon?"

"Well, no, of course not. That arternoon was a bit special on account his lordship was going scrumping."

"Going scrumping?"

"Ah. You know. Kids scrump apples, Sir G. scrumped rock-garden plants."

"You knew he intended to do this on that Friday afternoon?"

"Yes, of course I did."

"Do you mean that he told you?"

"Not me. Mrs. Prynne. So she comes down to the piggeries and says, 'You better put his special trowels ready,' she says, 'and he'll need the other bits and pieces, I daresay.'"

"What did you understand by that?"

"Why, apart from the trowels—three of 'em there was, one the ordinary kind, like me and you might use, and a long and a short for digging up ferns—there was two small forks, one with two prongs—thin and sharp, they are—and a more ordinary one with three prongs, the kind what go with the more ordinary trowel. Then there was a dibber and a kind of knife for taking cuttings, and a pocket knife and a very special kind of a little trowel for seedlings. Well, Mrs. Prynne, her says to me . . ."

"Your Worship," put in the defendant's solicitor, "is this evidence admissible?"

"What evidence, Mr. Winslade?" asked the chairman.

"This evidence of what Mrs. Prynne said. We have already listened to one quotation of her words to the witness. I submit, with all respect, that this ranks as hearsay, and, as such, is not admissible."

The chairman conferred with his fellow justices and then with the Clerk of the Court. Then he addressed the witness.

"Never mind what Mrs. Prynne said. She can tell us that herself, if we wish to hear it."

"O.K., then," said the witness amiably. "Just as you like."

"Thank you, your Worship," said the solicitor. "Now, Mr. Castle, you say that you put out the tools you have

mentioned. Where?"

"I haven't bin asked yet whether I did put 'em out, but I did. I put 'em on the path what goes be the side of the rock garden, all assepting the ordinary fork and trowel. Them I puts ready in the front porch."

"Why?"

"He needed 'em to dig up the plants he was going to scrump. He 'ad to be quick, yer see. The more fancy bits, they was for the plantin', when he 'ad more time, if you take me."

"What did you do after that?"

"I has me bit of dinner about har-past twelve, and then I goes off away down to the old *Pig and Whistle*. I stops there till they closes, and then I goes orf to me mum to get me tea. Then I goes back to the old *Pig and Whistle*, after I give her a hand with the mangle, and after that I found Sir G. in the rock garden. He were stone-cold dead. I goes for Mrs. Prynne, and she takes a look at him, and she says . . ."

"Yes, yes. That will do, thank you, Mr. Castle. You may stand down. Call Dr. Cleghorn."

Dr. Cleghorn's evidence was the same as that which he had given at the inquest. The forensic expert followed him. Then the Inspector was called and testified to having been sent for to view the body. He reported that it had been photographed and that the various implements scattered around it had been tested for fingerprints, as had the collar of a dead dog which was lying on the path a couple of feet from the body. The path was of crazy paving bound by cement, and had taken no footprints.

"And what about the fingerprints on the tools?" he was asked.

"They were those of Sir Ganymede Trogett, whose fingerprints we took from the body. We also fingerprinted Mrs. Prynne and Castle, just as a check,

and Castle's prints were superimposed on those of Sir Ganymede."

"Did either Castle or Mrs. Prynne raise any objection to having their fingerprints taken?"

"No, sir. Castle made the usual crack—offered the customary observation, sir—to the effect that he supposed he'd better mind his p's and q's after this, and Mrs. Prynne said that it was not at all the kind of thing she was used to, but neither made what you could call an objection, no, sir."

"Now, Inspector, we have heard that there was only one wound on the body, apart from a contusion on the back of the head which the medical evidence states was caused by a fall after the heart had been pierced, and that this fatal wound had been inflicted by a long, thin, very sharp instrument having two cutting edges. Have your researches brought such a weapon to light?"

"Yes, sir. The fact is, eight such weapons have come to light, any one of them, in my opinion, capable of inflicting the wound referred to."

"Did you test them for fingerprints?"

"Yes, sir. The prints were the same as those on the tools, sir, with the exception of one, which bore traces of other fingers."

"Have you these weapons with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please show them to the bench. They will not be handled." The witness signed to one of the policemen who were acting as Warrant Officers, and the weapons were brought forward. The reporter, who seemed to be a very thorough and painstaking young man, had listed them, Timothy noted, as silver-hilted swords of the early, middle, and late eighteenth century, one by an unknown maker, one by John Carman of Holborn, one by William Kersill, mounted by Charles Bibb of Great Newport Street, one by William Toone, one by Kentish

of Pope's Head Alley, one by Stevens of Temple Gate, one by John Fayle of Fleet Street, and one by Ralph Frith, mounted by Cullam of Charing Cross. All were of English silver, and that by the unknown maker was the earliest, dating from the first quarter of the century. Timothy wondered how the reporter had come by this detailed information.*

The Inspector had then been referred to the rock plants which had been scattered on and around the body.

"What did you deduce from these plants and the position in which you found them?"

"That the deceased was in the act of planting them when he was struck down and killed."

"We now come, at the proper time, to something which has already been referred to, the matter of the dead dog. Did you come to any conclusion as to the dead dog?"

"I came to the conclusion that it had been placed there by somebody who had it in for—who entertained feelings of revenge towards—the deceased."

"Your Worships," cried the defending solicitor, "I object to the inclusion of this matter of the dead dog. There is no evidence that it was placed there for any conceivable reason whatsoever. The Inspector is simply using his imagination."

"Your Worships will understand that the defendant had lost a favourite dog by reason of its having been run over by the deceased—er—before he became the deceased, of course," argued Mr. Mumble.

"My contention, your Worships, is that the court has heard nothing of this quite common although regrettable accident, and that therefore any reference to the dead dog—to either of the dead dogs—is entirely

irrelevant, and this irrelevance could be most damaging to my client's case," said Mr. Winslade.

"Very well, Mr. Winslade," agreed the chairman. "The dead dog, or dogs, can come up later, if the court deems it necessary. Continue, please, Mr. Mumble."

"Did you visit the rock garden owned by the defendant?"

"I did, sir."

"With what result?"

"He agreed that certain of his plants were missing, but declared that they had been stolen some time previously. He then identified the specimens I had collected from upon and around the deceased, as stolen from him, but not at all recently. Then I cautioned him and took him into custody."

"Had he anything to say?"

"Yes, sir. He said, 'You silly bastard, you've got the wrong sow by the ear. I wasn't anywhere near Parsons Purity all that afternoon. I couldn't have done in the bloody old bugger, however much I might have wanted to.'"

"Did you ask him where he had spent the afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did he claim to have been?"

"In the Highlands of Scotland, sir." This response elicited an appreciative guffaw from somebody who was then escorted out of the public gallery.

"Did he give any reason for going there?" pursued Mr. Mumble.

"Yes, sir. He said he knew there were protected plants up there, but he'd gone to"—at this point, the reporter had stated, the Inspector consulted his notes—"to Ben Lawyers, in Perthshire, with the intention of collecting the specimens known as *Veronica fruticans*,

Myosotis alpestris, Erigeron borealis, Gentiana nivalis, Saxifraga cernua, and Sedum villosum, sir."

"Were you able to ascertain whether or not he did go to Scotland for this purpose?"

"He did not, sir. I have evidence, which can be called if necessary, that he was seen in the bar of the *Nesting Pheasant* that same Friday evening and, moreover, that he uttered threats there—not for the first time, either—against Sir Ganymede Trogett."

"Thank you, Inspector. Your Worships, that is all the evidence I wish to call, so that concludes my case."

"Very well, Mr. Mumble. Horace Pimm, have you anything to say?" asked the Chairman.

"That I have!" said Pimm, ignoring the obvious anguish of his solicitor. "It's all right to pin this on me. I got my answer, and I don't make no bones about giving it."

"Your Worships!" pleaded Mr. Winslade.

"No, no. We should like to hear what he has to say," said the chairman. "Swear him, please."

"It's about them fingerprints. Castle knows about 'em. He was going to lend me one of them swords to cut the cake at my daughter's wedding, so, of course, I took hold of it to see what it was like for the job, but I see at once it wasn't no use, so I give it back straight away, and—"

"Your Worships," interrupted the agonised Mr. Winslade, "the fingerprints in question have not even been identified as those of my client. I request the chairman of the Bench to recall the witnesses so that I may demolish this utterly ridiculous charge."

The defendant, who had been informed privily by the young man that it would be in his interests to reserve his defence because it was a certainty that the magistrates would consider there was a case to be answered, gazed at him in perplexity. The Justices

looked at their watches and held a brief conference.
Then the chairman said,
“In that case, I think we had better adjourn for
lunch. The court will be in session again at two-thirty.”

* He got it from *The Small-Sword in England* by J. D. Aylward.—M.T.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Refutable Evidence

"I propose to establish," said Mr. Winslade, "that the defendant has no case to answer. Instead of reserving his defence, therefore, on his behalf I call Inspector Hallam. Inspector, you have produced in court eight swords."

"Yes, sir."

"Silver-hilted swords, I believe?"

"So I was informed at the Swanswater Museum, sir."

"Did they also inform you at the museum that such swords were worn for display, as part of an eighteenth-century gentleman's costume, and not for use?"

"No, sir."

"Well, I will not labour the point. Did you, on any of these swords, find traces of blood?"

"No, sir."

"Did you attempt to do so?"

"Yes, sir."

"But without positive result. Now, these rock plants which were found scattered on and around the body. You say that they came from my client's rock garden?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it impossible that they came from elsewhere?"

"The defendant admitted he had lost plants, sir."

"These particular plants?"

“He has contradicted himself about that, sir.”

“So you selected the statement which fitted your case, and ignored the statement which went against it. / see. Now for the dead dog. Did you establish where the dog came from?”

“Yes, sir. It was the property of Silas Pilbeam of Much Adford, near Cranthorne Minster.”

“Did you establish whether the defendant knew Silas Pilbeam?”

“Yes, sir. They were on friendly terms.”

“But you think that the defendant stole his friend’s dog and slaughtered it?”

“It had been given poison, sir.”

“If the defendant had felt the urge to slaughter a dog and place the carcass, as a kind of Biblical reproach, near the body of the man who had run down and killed his own (the defendant’s) dog, would he have chosen to deprive a friend? Would he not rather have collected some mongrel stray?”

“No, sir.”

“You sound very positive, Inspector. Will you enlarge upon your answer?”

“The dog in question knew the defendant, sir, and trusted him, and would have taken food from him.”

“Poisoned food?”

“Yes, sir.” (At this point, said the newspaper report, an angry voice from the public benches shouted, “It’s a bloody lie! ‘Orry Pimm never p’isoned my dog! I reckon squire done it hisself!” The speaker was escorted out.)

“Now we come to this statement of where the defendant spent the afternoon in question. You informed the court that he contended he went to the Highlands of Scotland in quest of protected wild plants?”

“Yes, sir.”

"Yet you found it easy enough to establish that he was identified, that same evening, in the bar of the *Nesting Pheasant* inn at Cranthorne Minster?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yet you accepted that his statement was a mistaken attempt to prove an alibi?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I suggest, Inspector, that it was merely a pleasantry made at your expense by an innocent man who never, for one moment, expected it to be taken seriously. What do you say to that?"

"I thought he was serious, sir."

"You further state that, while he was at the *Nesting Pheasant* that evening, he uttered threats against the deceased."

"Yes, such was my information, sir."

"But is it likely that he would have uttered threats against a man he knew was already dead?"

"Yes, to put people off the scent, sir. I took it to be a sort of smoke-screen."

"You are a highly imaginative man, Inspector."

After the Bench had asked whether Mr. Mumble wished to re-examine the witness, which he declined to do, Castle was called.

"Do you deny that you lent Mr. Pimm a sword with which to cut the cake at his daughter's wedding?"

"No."

"*Did* you lend it to him?" put in Mr. Mumble quickly.

"Not as I remember."

"Ah, I *thought* perhaps you had misunderstood the question. Pardon me, your Worship. A little matter of adjustment," said Mr. Mumble.

"You stated, in your evidence, that in fine weather the front door of Trogett Hall was always left wide open," went on Mr. Winslade, with a glance of dislike at

his opponent. "When this is so, is it possible to see the staircase wall without actually going into the house?"

"Yes, if you squints a bit side'ards."

"So that any casual caller, standing at the open front door, would be able to see the weapons hanging on the staircase wall?"

"Of course they could, easy!"

"We have been told that at least eight of these weapons had silver hilts. That, alone, apart from the beautiful workmanship and the fact that they are two hundred years old or more, would make them very valuable. Do you agree?"

"Like as not. I don't know nothing about it."

"But you will accept that these silver-hilted swords were valuable?"

"Yes, if you want it that way."

"Now, Mr. Castle, you also stated that you, Mrs. Prynne, and Sir Ganymede Trogett were all out of the house at the same time. Do you still submit that, with no-one at home and with all those valuable weapons on view, the front door was still left wide open?"

"Likely Sir G. opened it, then, when he come home with they little plants."

"That was not what you gave the court to understand, is it? Now, tell me, why should he do such a thing?"

"'Ow do I know? He done what he liked. It were his own house."

"Thank you, Mr. Castle. That will be all."

After Mr. Mumble had declined to take over the witness, since, so far, he had heard nothing which would damage the case for the police, Mrs. Prynne returned to the stand.

"Mrs. Prynne, do you agree with the statement that, in fine weather, the front door of Trogett Hall was left wide open?"

"In summer, yes. Sir Ganymede liked fresh air."

"But would it have been left wide open while the house was entirely empty?"

"No."

"So, on that Friday afternoon, the afternoon of Sir Ganymede's death, you say that the front door was closed?"

"I closed it myself before I took my afternoon off."

"So that it would not have been possible for anybody to have seen the weapons which were hanging on the staircase wall?"

"No, it would not have been possible, for two reasons."

"Two reasons?"

"Yes. For one thing, the front door was closed, and, for another, the weapons—which, incidentally, belong to me—were not hanging on the staircase wall that afternoon."

"Not. . . ? Will you explain that to the court, please?"

(Mr. Winslade, said the newspaper report, at this point cast a triumphant glance at his opponent, but his delight was short-lived.)

"Knowing Castle, and his gift for forgetting to perform tasks allotted to him," said the witness, "I took down all the weapons, knowing that Sir Ganymede had ordered Castle to clean them, and dumped them in the outhouse."

"Oh!" (Mr. Winslade was obviously faced with an unexpected answer, commented the newspaper report.) "You dumped them in the outhouse. This has not been mentioned before."

"Nobody asked."

"Not even Inspector Hallam?"

"No."

"Did it not occur to you to mention it to him?"

“No. Let the police do their own dirty work.”

“Mrs. Prynne! That is not a proper comment to make to the court. You will withdraw it at once!”

“Very well.” (Timothy could imagine that teak mask, those leaden, dark-grey, tiny, intelligent eyes.)

“Now, Mrs. Prynne, who, besides yourself, knew that you had moved the swords to the outhouse?”

“No one, so far as I remember. I did not mention to Castle what I had done.”

“Was there any reason why you did not?”

“I thought it would be a nice surprise for him in the morning. He hates work, and I knew he’d try any dodge to get out of cleaning the weapons while they were still hanging on the wall, so I dumped them on him, that’s all.”

“And then you locked the outhouse door, no doubt.”

“No, I did not.”

“Really? But the weapons were very valuable.”

“Yes, but the outhouse doesn’t have a door.” It was Mr. Mumble’s turn to look triumphant, commented the newspaper report. It went on to say that at this point Mr. Mumble not only looked triumphant, but jumped to his feet and said:

“So it was even easier for the defendant—whether or not he had previously cut a wedding-cake with it—to take a weapon from the outhouse than from the staircase wall?”

“Yes, if it can be shown that the defendant knew that the swords were in the outhouse, but how *could* he have known?” retorted Mr. Winslade. “The witness has stated that nobody except herself could have known where the weapons were. Really, your Worships, I must protest against being interrupted in this fashion, and for these unseemly references to the defendant’s obviously truthful statement about the sword I recall Horace Pimm.”

“Good old ‘Orry! Stick it, lad!” cried a supporter, who was thereupon removed from the court.

“Now, Mr. Pimm,” said his solicitor, “you have heard what the witnesses have had to say. Will you give us, in your own words, an account of how you spent that Friday afternoon.”

“All right,” replied Pimm, “but it won’t do me much good if I do.”

“You must allow the court to decide upon that. I am sure their Worships will give you a most patient and sympathetic hearing. Just take your time.”

“Well, sir . . .”

“Address the Bench, please.”

“Well, your Worships, it was like this. When I told the Inspector I went to the Highlands of Scotland, well, it was just a bit of a joke, like, but I did go out, and was out all afternoon.”

“Oh, yes? Where did you go?” asked the chairman.

“I had half a day coming to me, being as I had stood in for the second caretaker at the school where I’m the chief caretaker, so, it being his half-day and a regular fine one, I suggested as how he might do a bit of paying back. He agreed, so I got the wife to pack me up a bit of dinner and off I went to Disley.”

“He means Bisley, I suppose,” said one of the Justices.

“More likely Wisley,” said another. “The gardens, you know.”

“No, your Worship,” said the witness, a trifle impatiently, “I said Disley and I meant Disley.”

“And why did you go to Disley?” enquired Mr. Winslade.

“To have a look at the Frendleigh Nurseries. Their rock plants are famous all over the world. I wanted to see what they’d got that I hadn’t got.”

“Why did you not tell the Inspector this?”

"I had my reasons."

"Yes, but what were they?"

"I'd rather not say. If it comes to the come-to I'll have to make a clean breast of it, I suppose, but, until it do, I'd rather keep quiet about it."

"Don't be a B.F., 'Orry!" shouted another supporter. "Tell 'im you pinched the damn' stuff! They can't do more nor fine you a pound or two for that!"

"If there are any more of these interruptions," said the chairman of the magistrates, "I shall order the court to be cleared. These unseemly interjections do not assist the defendant. In fact, they have the very reverse effect. Please continue, Mr. Winslade."

"Very well, your Worship. Now, Mr. Pimm, you went to Disley to study the rock gardens there. What is the procedure? How did you obtain admission to the grounds?"

"I just walked in, like everybody else. If I lived nearer I'd go oftener, but I only go once a year, when I can spare the time. Spend a rare nice time going round, you can, and nobody don't say nothing to you."

"But if you had told the Inspector this, he could not have brought this charge against you."

"He wouldn't have believed me, no more than he believed I'd been to Scotland."

"But between his being prepared to believe that you went to Disley, which you say you did do, and his being prepared to believe that you went to Scotland, which you did not do, there is a substantial difference. At Disley, somebody is certain to remember you. Don't you see that?"

"That's as may be. People don't remember all that easy, and they as do remember won't come forward. They don't want to get mixed up in nothing, and who's to blame 'em?"

"Oh, come now! Perhaps you passed the time of day with somebody there?"

"I never spoke to anybody there. I never spoke to a soul."

"How did you get there?"

"On my motor-bike."

"Where did you park it?"

"Outside a pub."

"That means you went inside for a drink. Most likely the barman would remember you."

"He might, and then, again, he might not."

"You should have told the Inspector all this. He would not wish to arrest the wrong man. When did you leave Disley?"

"I dunno."

"Come, now, you must have some idea. What time was it when you left your home?"

"About half-past twelve. I put in my morning at the school, as usual, then I left at twelve, when the nippers come out, then I called in home to pick up the lunch my wife had got ready for me, and off I went."

"At what time did you reach Disley?"

"I dunno."

The solicitor gave a patient sigh.

"Well, at what time did you reach your home again?"

"About eleven at night. I was at the *Nesting Pheasant* till closing time."

"At what time did you get to the *Nesting Pheasant*?"

"I dunno."

"Well, was the bar open when you arrived?"

"Ar, it were."

"Were there many customers?"

"Half-a-dozen, maybe."

“So it was about half-past six when you arrived,” interjected Mr. Mumble.

“Yes, sir, but, other than that, I can’t say nothing about the time. I didn’t have my watch. It was being overhauled, like.”

“Surely there was a clock in the bar?” persisted Mr. Mumble.

“I never noticed what it said.”

“Not that it matters,” said Mr. Winslade, a little too hastily.

“Oh, doesn’t it, though!” cried Mr. Mumble. “It matters that Sir Ganymede Trogett was killed at about six o’clock, and that, presumably, the defendant has no alibi until some time after six-thirty!”

“Really! I appeal to the Bench! These interruptions . . . ,” protested Mr. Winslade.

The magistrates held a short consultation. Then the chairman said,

“There are obscurities in this matter which had better be cleared up elsewhere. We find that there is a case to be answered. Horace Pimm, you are remanded in custody and will appear at the next Assizes.”

A plea for bail, the newspaper reported, was refused.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Pimpernel Herring

“So you’ve come back alive,” said Dewes. “I must say that I am relieved. And how did you get on? Is the church all that Fellowby thought?”

“Oh, yes, and the pub was excellent.”

“And you had no sinister experiences?”

“I am making a full report at the meeting. We had better go in, unless you want another drink.”

“No, no, I await your disclosures with impatience.”

They left the charming anteroom, with its elegantly plastered ceiling and its Romney above the fireplace, and went into the Council Chamber, once the ballroom of a royal duke’s town house. At the long table which occupied almost the whole length of the room were seated the committee of Phisbe, and there was a double row of chairs along the walls, for this was a specially convened extraordinary general meeting of the Society, and an encouraging number of members had elected to attend it.

The president came in and was greeted with polite applause as he took his seat at the head of the table. Timothy sat on his right, the treasurer on his left. There was a subdued hum of conversation and then the president, acting as chairman, opened the proceedings. There was a good deal of routine business to be endured, but at last the chairman announced:

“As you have heard, since we last met the Society has been fully occupied with several important projects, but there remains a report for which, I am sure, you have all been waiting. Mr. Herring has recently returned from his visit to the church at Parsons Purity, of which you were notified in the Society’s last bulletin. He will now give us an account of his findings. Mr. Timothy Herring.”

“I will not read the whole of my official report, Mr. President. It has already been circulated among the members of committee, so I will condense it, because I shall have certain comments to make on it before it is thrown open to discussion,” said Timothy. “I went down to Parsons Purity a fortnight ago at the request of the committee to investigate a complaint we received from one of the parishioners that the lead had been removed from the roof of the church and that the vicar and churchwardens had decided, in the interests of economy, to re-roof the building with corrugated iron.

“We decided to take up the case because, as some of you may remember, we had a very good report of this church from our late secretary, Mr. Fellowby. I inspected the church and checked my findings against his report, and was of the opinion that the church was well worth our attention and should be properly re-roofed either with lead or suitable tiles.

“As you are aware, Mr. President, our policy is never to refuse advice and financial assistance in such cases, but we also make it a rule to require those with an interest in the property under review to make whatever monetary contribution they can afford towards the cost of reparations and repairs and to purchase freeholds, if necessary, and so forth. In the case of Parsons Purity church, I had some initial difficulty in persuading the vicar that his own scheme, although practicable, was unsuitable, but I think the problems have now been

resolved, and our surveyor will go down and make his own inspection. Until that is done, I cannot, of course, give you any estimate of what the cost of the re-roofing is likely to be." He looked expectantly at the treasurer, who rose to his feet.

"I am happy to tell you, Mr. President," he said, "that, owing to some kind benefactions and voluntary subscriptions we received during the past year, our finances are on a particularly sound basis, and we are unlikely to find any embarrassment in meeting whatever sums may be required."

"We would do well to put the work in hand immediately, I think," Timothy went on, "since the roof, a fine example of double-truss, arch-braced timbering of the thirteenth century, is at present protected only by tarpaulins. That is all I need say, before we open the matter to general discussion. I have here two dozen copies of my full report, if any member would like to have more detailed information before a vote is taken at the end of this meeting. Your committee meets again on Tuesday next to decide upon appropriate action. I think committee members have already been apprised of this date."

"Yes, they have, Mr. President," said the dogsbody from the small table at which he was taking notes in shorthand. Timothy sat down.

"Any questions?" asked the chairman.

"Yes, Mr. President," said the member who invariably asked a question at the annual general meeting. "Will Mr. Herring tell us what he means when he says he had some initial difficulty in persuading the vicar to allow us to help him? It seems to me . . ."

"Yes," said Timothy, rising to cut short the flow of oratory which was to be expected from this member, once he had been allowed his head. "One can see the vicar's point of view, actually. It was not that he wanted

to refuse our help, I'm sure. It was that he has a particular pet project, his youth work, and he was of the opinion that any available money should be spent on his young people and not on the fabric of the building."

"Has the church any special features besides a fine timber roof?" asked another member.

"I don't know about special features," Timothy replied. "It is mostly a transitional Norman building with a very interesting crypt. Oh, yes—and a Norman font made entirely of lead. There is one very fine fourteenth-century effigy on a wall-tomb in a thirteenth-century chapel, and there are the remains of the rood stair and a couple of good brasses. It is also possible to climb the tower."

"Is there anything else of interest in the village?" asked another member. "I was wondering whether the secretary could arrange an outing. I could get our usual cut-price quotation for the motor-coaches."

"Certainly," said Timothy, "we can arrange an outing, if enough members would care to go." (The dogsbody, to whom would fall the task of making this arrangement, sighed inwardly. There were always disgruntled members after a Society outing. He decided to ask for a rise in salary.)

"I read in the papers that the squire of the village had been murdered, didn't I?" ventured a timid member.

"Oh, yes, that reminds me," said Timothy. "I may be able to arrange for members to see over the manor house. It is by no means unique, but it is a very pleasant eighteenth-century mansion built, *almost* certainly—or, if not built, altered and improved—by William Kent soon after he had designed Holkham."

"Has it a ghost?" asked a frivolous lady member.

“Oh, yes,” Timothy gravely replied. “It takes the form of a man armed with a knife who haunts a chamber known as the Uncanny Room.”

“Well, if there are no more questions,” said the chairman, with the unerring instinct of his kind for sensing the point at which the meeting was liable to disintegrate into a welter of irrelevancies, “I suggest that we send our surveyor and our architect to look at the church at Parsons Purity and report back to the committee, who will then vote upon the appropriate action to be taken. Will someone propose this as a motion? Thank you, Mrs. Wells. Seconded? Thank you, Mr. Tomlinson. Those in favour? Thank you. Now, if there is no other business”—he ignored a tentatively uplifted hand—“I declare the meeting closed.”

“What was that about a ghost with a knife? Were you joking?” demanded Dewes, who had loitered in the anteroom to waylay Timothy on his way out. Timothy laughed.

“What do *you* think?” he said. He went straight to his club and telephoned Jane Stretton at her own home, although he did not know whether she had returned to it. “I want to talk about the unfortunate Horace Pimm,” he said, glad to hear her voice. “Can I come and see you? Tomorrow at one, for lunch? Well, thanks very much. Yes, the insurance people are still considering their verdict about the car, but I think it will be all right. Anyway, I’ve got another one. Make it half-past twelve for a cocktail? Right. Fine. Goodbye.”

She was at the front gate before he had stopped the car. With her was a child with a rough head of brown hair and dark blue eyes like her own.

“Trudi’s come back,” said Jane, “and this is Colin.” The boy shook hands. “Go into the kitchen and see how Trudi is getting on, darling.”

"I'd rather stay," said the child. "I like men better than women."

"No, you can't stay this time. Mr. Herring and I want to talk, so run along, there's a good boy."

"Looks a nice youngster," said Timothy, when the child had left them and they were in her sitting-room. "How long has he been here?"

"Since the day before yesterday. I haven't decided what to do about him yet. When he's seven I suppose I can send him away to school, but that's six months ahead."

"Well, it's your problem, and you have my sympathy. All the same, he seems a nice kid, and I expect he depends on you, you know."

"Why have you come, Tim? Not just to see me, I'm sure, and not to persuade me to rejoice in my new-found motherhood."

"No, it's about Pimm. I'm absolutely certain he didn't do it."

"I don't think he did, either, but he seems to have made some rather silly threats, and made them in public, too, which wasn't very clever of him. Then, he's known to be an injured party. He really minded terribly about Ganymede helping himself to his plants. Then, again, there *were* the plants, and he admits himself that they came from his garden. Besides, if he didn't do it, who did?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out. The police, presumably, won't do any more. They're convinced they've got the right man. Who's living at the Hall now? Are Mrs. Prynne and Castle still in possession?"

"No, the house is empty. It's up for sale, and the money is to be divided equally among Mrs. Prynne, Mrs. King, and young Hemsley, except for a hundred pounds to Castle and two hundred and fifty to Pimm."

"Oh, dear! So Pimm stands to gain by the death!"

“He couldn’t possibly have known that, I’m sure. As a matter of fact, it doesn’t seem at all likely that any of the beneficiaries would have known what was in the will. That means the crime couldn’t have been done for gain.”

“Look, Jane, there’s some kind of proof somewhere in that house. I’m certain of it. There’s jolly well got to be. I’ve still got the spare key Sir Ganymede lent me. I meant to give it back, but it slipped my mind. I’m going over there to have a look round. I’ll tell Mrs. King and Hemsley what I’m going to do, and they can come along and see fair play if they want to. As I don’t know where she is, I can’t contact Mrs. Prynne, but I’m not too sorry about that.”

“Well, let’s have a drink.” She went to the door and called to Trudi, who came in with a tray, followed by the child.

“To the success!” Trudi cried gaily. “I mix.”

“Why four glasses?” asked Jane.

“The little one,” explained Trudi, “drinks also. I mix him a long, watery orange and one little teaspoonful of gin.”

After lunch—Trudi and Colin had theirs in the kitchen—Jane said,

“Trudi is going to take him to pick wild raspberries. May I come with you to the Hall?”

“I’d like that.”

“All right. If you’re going to see Mrs. King, I’ll wash up while you’re gone, and you can come back here for me.”

Mrs. King was helping old Badbury in his front garden.

“Hullo!” she said, when she saw Timothy. “Nice of you to come and see us again.”

Timothy stated his errand.

"I hope you've no objection," he said. "I'm hoping (probably with misplaced optimism) to find something the police overlooked. I'm positive Pimm isn't their man."

"I don't know much about it," she said, "but I'd hate anybody to get into trouble for killing my father."

"I should have liked to ask permission of Mrs. Prynn, too, about visiting the Hall. I shall see young Hemsley, of course. I have to pass the lodge. I take it he'll have no objection?"

"How should I know? It will be a long time before we see our money, so I shouldn't think he would mind what you do."

"Is the Hall to be sold by auction?"

"I suppose so. It's all in the hands of the lawyers."

Old Badbury joined them at the garden gate.

"Plenty of money to spend on that oold charch now," he observed. "I fare to see that looking good as new, bor."

"You mind your own business, Daddy!" retorted Mrs. King. "It won't be *your* money that's spent on it, that's a sure thing!"

Timothy left them, pursued by old Badbury's cheerful chuckling, and drove back to pick up Jane Stretton. They reached the gates of Trogett Hall, and Timothy left the car and went to open them. Lizzie Hemsley heard him—or, more probably, she had heard the sounds of the car pulling up—and she came out of the lodge to greet him. He explained his errand and learned that her son had had his dinner and had gone back to work. She seemed surprised that it should have occurred to Timothy to ask permission to enter the house. He returned to the car and drove along the short, untidy, and untended gravel path to the front door.

There had not been time for the house to acquire a coating of dust, and the weapons, Timothy noted, were back on the staircase wall, except for one which the police still had in their possession.

"Of course, that's the likeliest thing," said Jane. "That he was killed with one of his own swords, I mean."

"Yes, so the police think. In fact, they must be sure of it by this time. You can see that one sword is missing. Going to be put in as evidence at the trial."

"And the other thing, Tim, is that Mrs. Prynne did it, you know. Had you thought of her?"

"Well, of course I'd thought of her, and I'd thought of Castle, too, but is it likely they'd have been allies? Anyway, I thought that Castle, at least, could prove an alibi."

"Where the police have gone wrong is in thinking that two people did it. They didn't, you know. All the same, it's just as well the police think there was an accomplice. They won't be able to find one, and that ought to let Pimm out."

"But there *must* have been an accomplice! The stab-wound was given from in front. You don't tell me that Trogett just stood still while somebody gave him his *quietus*?"

"He may not have stood still."

"Well, I suggested, when I first heard of it, that he must have been fighting a duel, but I didn't really think that was it. You don't seriously think—I mean, it's ludicrous!"

"Why? There were the place, the weapons, and the loved one, all together at the same time."

Timothy was reminded of a remark which he had failed to interpret correctly when the squire uttered it.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Trogett said to me, once, that the only word Mrs. Prynne really knew was

touché, and he didn't think she would ever have to say it very often. I thought he was either being rather unkind about her lack of feminine charm, or else that he meant she was slightly *non compos mentis*. It never occurred to me that he might be talking about fencing. Anyway, wasn't she rather elderly to fight a duel?"

"She's forty-five. Ganymede was fifty. He told me once that she used to teach fencing at one of the big schools for girls, when she was a gym mistress."

"But that means the thing could have been a complete accident! Why couldn't she have told the police that? Why let Pimm take the rap?"

"She would have had to explain why they were using real rapiers instead of foils, and why they weren't wearing any protective clothing, wouldn't she? Besides, she may not like Pimm."

"She doesn't seem to have liked Trogett much, either, if she pinked him through the heart."

"You've just said it could have been an accident. You can't have it both ways."

"All right. Objection sustained. I'm beginning to believe that she didn't like me, either." He mounted the stairs, followed by Jane, and opened the door to the bedroom he had occupied during his short stay at Trogett Hall. "This is where somebody tried to do me in," he said, with melancholy, legitimate pride. "I'd always thought it was Trogett, in spite of the fact that he'd changed his dressing-gown the next time I met him, but it could just as well have been Mrs. Pryne, I suppose."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"The only thing is that the home-made bomb sounds more like Trogett."

"Wasn't it arranged that Ganymede was going with us to London in your car? She meant to kill him."

“You don’t mean—oh, no, that’s a bit too far-fetched!”

“Your car was wrecked, wasn’t it? There’s nothing far-fetched about facts.”

“There were those silver cups in my suitcase. Come to think of it, I don’t believe Trogett would have wanted to destroy them as well as me. That’s no sort of proof, of course. All the same, there was no point in his having planted the stuff on me unless he intended to blackmail me on the strength of my having stolen it.”

Somewhere in the house a door slammed. Jane gave an hysterical little cry, stepped into the room—she had remained on the threshold up to this point—and closed the door with caution.

“Somebody else is in the house!” she whispered.

“So what?” said Timothy, with callous, masculine cheerfulness.

“We have no business to be here! It’s probably the police!”

“What about it? I’m in perfectly legitimate possession of a key. If in trouble, bluff it out. Leave it to me, and don’t weaken.”

He went to the bedroom door and opened it. There were footfalls below, those of one person only. They rang sharply on the flagstones of the passage which led from the servants’ quarters and the kitchen. It was not very likely to be the police, thought Timothy, looking over the gallery railing, and was not at all surprised when Mrs. Prynne came into view. She looked up and saw him.

“Ah, Mr. Fish!” she said. “Are you also among the cannibal kings?” Her tone was ferociously good-humoured, and this surprised him. It was a tone he had never expected to hear from the gaunt and poker-faced housekeeper. She mounted the stairs, passed him before he realised what was in her mind, and entered

the bedroom. "Aha!" she said, confronting Jane Stretton. "I was right! Cannibal Fish has other fish to fry! I thought as much! Get out of my bedroom, you strumpet!"

Timothy grasped her shoulder. It was like clutching a piece of iron. He gripped it uncommonly hard and felt her flinch.

"That will do, Mrs. Prynne," he said quietly. "I understand this house is up for sale. I have permission from Mrs. King to look it over. I also possess a key."

Mrs. Prynne shrugged. Timothy dropped his hand from her shoulder.

"It's my house, too, and John Hemsley's," she said, with quiescent sullenness.

"I know. I couldn't see John—he's at work—but I spoke to his grandmother. I would have asked you, too, had I known where to find you."

"We want thirty thousand, ten thousand each," she said.

"Fair enough. Well, do you mind if Mrs. Stretton and I continue to look around?"

"I came in when I saw the car," she said, making no attempt to answer the question. "I thought it might be yours."

"I wonder why? The only car of mine you have ever seen was a dark blue Humber. This is a light grey Mercedes-Benz. You blew up the Humber, didn't you?"

"You are mad, Mr. Herring," she said.

"Only nor' nor'west," he retorted. "I know a hawk from a handsaw, Mrs. Prynne. Come along, Jane. I want to take a look at the library. Are you including the contents of the house? I suppose you will wish to sell them separately," he added, over his shoulder, after he and Jane had passed the enigmatic housekeeper and had reached the door.

"It's all one to me," she replied, and walked to the window. "The lawyers will settle everything, I suppose. Oh, well, take a look round, by all means. Much good may it do you, or Horace Pimm either!"

"Tim," said Jane, when they were inside the library and had closed the door, "that woman terrifies me."

"So she does me. I mean, she makes my blood run cold. I'm not sure it's the same thing."

"I think we ought to go!"

"And leave her with a moral victory? Oh, no, not me. But if you're scared, go and sit in the car. I shan't be long. I'm damned if I'm going to turn tail because that female devil waggles her horns at me."

"But, if we're right, she's a murderer in actual fact, and a double murderer by intention. I don't want to leave you alone in the house with her."

"All right. Stick around, then."

"Well, look at what you want to look at, but be quick."

Timothy took out books at random, and put them back without looking at more than their bindings. The door opened, and Mrs. Prynne came in. She remained in the doorway, an impressive, impassive figure, and, in masterly silence, watched his pointless activities. Jane ceased to keep her eyes on Timothy's thin, long hands. Like a trapped creature watching its predator, she kept her gaze fixed on Mrs. Prynne's face. The sardonic voice spoke.

"I'll be off now," it said. "I don't know what you think you're looking for, but I can tell you this: you won't find it."

"I know no more than she does," said Timothy, after they had heard the front door slam, "but I'll just make sure she's gone." He ran down the stairs and looked out of a ground-floor window. Mrs. Prynne was halfway down the drive. "Yes, it's all right!" he called up

to Jane Stretton. She descended the stairs and joined him. "All the same," he went on, "there doesn't really seem much we can do here. I'm going to take a look at the rock garden. Coming?"

"No, I'd rather not. I'll sit in the car. Do you happen to have a cigarette?"

"Yes, of course." He saw her settled, and then walked round the side of the house. The rock garden, as Pimm had indicated, was a large one, but, except for its size—it was fully eighty yards long—and faint traces of the chalk marks with which the police had outlined the position of the body on the flagged path, there was nothing to interest Timothy, and he soon returned to the car.

"Where now?" Jane asked.

"I'll drive you home. I've had an idea—two ideas, in fact. You wouldn't know where a chap named Manciple lives, I suppose? He's one of the local magistrates who took Sir Ganymede's licence away."

"Gerald Manciple? Yes, he lives just this side of Cranthorne Minster on the Trumpston road. The house is called Chaucers. There was a Manciple among Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, if you remember. Is it any good asking. . . ?"

"Well, I wondered whether he'd know the chairman, or anybody else, of the Swanswater Bench. I think it would help if I could find out why they decided to commit Pimm. I would hardly have thought there was a case to answer, you know."

He drove Jane home and accepted her invitation to stay to tea. Again they had the meal together in her sitting-room, while Trudi and the child had theirs in the kitchen. He wondered what Trudi thought of this arrangement, but decided that she was accustomed to it when Jane had visitors.

“Do you want to telephone Gerald Manciple?” Jane asked.

“No, I’ll take my chance of finding him in. I know him slightly, from encountering him at the *Nesting Pheasant*, so I’m sure he’ll let me talk to him if he’s there.”

Manciple was in. Timothy was shown into a pleasant room, heavily, comfortably, unfashionably furnished. Manciple introduced his wife, who excused herself and disappeared when Timothy stated that his errand had to do with a court case.

“A court case?” said Manciple, when his wife had closed the door. “Oh, yes?”

“I wondered whether you could give me an introduction to the chairman, or one of the other members, of the Swanswater Bench? It’s about Horace Pimm.”

“Yes, I can turn you on to Blacklock,” said Manciple, “but, to save you trouble, I think I can tell you anything about Pimm that you might want to know. I’ve discussed him with Blacklock—in fact, we’ve had several talks about the case. What did you particularly want to ask him?”

“Well, I read the account of the hearing, and I was a little surprised that the justices decided that there was a case to answer. It seemed to me so thin that I should have expected them to throw it out unless, or until, the police discovered more evidence. Of course, I wasn’t in court. All I know is what I read in the local paper.”

“Yes, well, I’m in the same position. I was in my own court at the time of the hearing, otherwise, as I know a bit about Pimm from seeing and hearing him at the pub in Cranthorne, I should have liked to be present when the case was heard.”

“Do you know on what grounds they decided to commit him?”

“Oh, yes. Between ourselves, Blacklock is pretty certain Pimm had nothing to do with Trogett’s death, but his Bench agreed with him that, as there was some slight evidence against him—and they admitted that it was slight—it might be fairer to him to let him stand trial and be completely exonerated rather than that matters should drag on without anybody coming to a settled conclusion.”

“But I thought the police *had* come to a settled conclusion. They are wrong, of course, so I should certainly have thought Pimm would have been discharged as having no case to answer.”

“If he had consented to prove his alibi, there would have been no case to answer.”

“You believe—I mean, Mr. Blacklock believes—that Pimm has an alibi, then?—that he did go to Disley that Friday afternoon?”

“Not only that. Blacklock believes not only that Pimm went to Disley that Friday afternoon, but that he lifted one or two items from the rock gardens belonging to the Frendleigh Nursery, and that’s why he’s shy about having his alibi proved.”

“Then he’s a fool. What did Mr. Blacklock make of the witnesses?”

“He said he wouldn’t believe anything Castle said, whether on oath or under the influence of drink.”

“And Mrs. Prynne?”

“He thought she was speaking the truth, but that it didn’t help much.”

“She wasn’t really asked much, so far as I can gather from the local paper.”

“Well, the prosecuting counsel, who was acting for the police, of course, didn’t want to press her. They thought her evidence a bit of a two-edged sword, I gather, and were afraid she might prejudice their case. You see, while it was thought that, from the open front

door, it would have been easy for the murderer to see the murder weapon hanging on the wall, it didn't look so good, from the police point of view, when Mrs. Prynne let out that she'd moved the whole collection of swords and things into the outhouse. The outhouse is round at the back of the kitchen regions. You can't see it from the rockery, and, besides that, Pimm was not to know that the kitchen regions would be entirely deserted that afternoon. Mrs. Prynne also admitted that it was not customary for both herself and Castle to have the same free afternoon."

"I see what you mean when you say the prosecution didn't want to press her too hard. Well, I'm going gunning on Pimm's behalf. If he won't alibi himself, somebody must do it for him."

"How do you propose to begin?"

"Oh, tomorrow I shall drive over to Disley and see what I can find out."

"Pimm himself didn't think anybody there would remember him, you know."

"There might be ways of recalling him to someone's memory. Anyway, I shall see what I can do. I shall begin by calling on his wife and asking her what he was wearing that afternoon."

"Probably his Sunday clothes, whatever they were."

"To travel all those miles on a motor-cycle?"

"Well, if he was wearing the usual hideous get-up and a tin lid, he'd look like a hundred other motor-cyclists, and you'll never get him sorted out in that case."

"Wish me luck, anyway. There's that other funny thing, you know. I still can't understand why it was not until Mrs. Prynne was recalled, that the court was allowed to assume that those weapons were hanging on the staircase wall, when all the time they were in

the outhouse. Why didn't the Inspector point out at once that that's where he was shewn them?"

"Look back at the answer to a previous question. The police are convinced—*honestly* convinced—they've got the right man. They're not going to risk sniping at their own case by finding arguments to put on the other side of it. Why should they? It's up to the defence to do that. They think one of those rapiers was the murder weapon, and therefore . . ."

"The defence shall be well supplied with ammunition," said Timothy. "I'll give them sniping!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mrs. Prynne Takes Umbrage

Mrs. Pimm was neither voluble nor tearful. She seemed to take Timothy's visit as a matter of course, gave him a seat in a remarkably well-furnished room which looked out on to a large rock garden, and, although it was nearly seven o'clock, she went off to make a cup of tea. When she returned with it she said,

"They can't punish him for what he didn't do. Anyway, I'm going to tell them what he *did* do, and that ought to be enough."

"Yes, it ought," Timothy agreed, accepting a cup of strong tea and a home-made scone.

"Oh, you know what it is, do you?" She did not sound particularly interested. The question was asked out of politeness, he gathered. She herself knew what her husband had done, and that, to her, meant that, most likely, everybody knew. "Yes, he went to the Disley nurserymen and lifted one or two bits from the rockeries there."

"I shouldn't have thought it was possible to do that," said Timothy. "Whenever I've been to any nurseries there have been gardeners here, there, and everywhere. I shouldn't have thought you could get away with so much as a leaf without being spotted by someone."

"There's a bit down by the water," Mrs. Pimm explained. "You'd have to watch out, but it could be managed. It *was* managed. I know that for a fact, but he'll never own to it. Not even if they were going to hang him he wouldn't own to it. He's got his pride, you see."

"I wouldn't call it pride. I'd call it sheer bone-headed cussedness," said Timothy, "and if *he* won't confess to it, *you'll* have to."

"I wouldn't do that. He'd never forgive me. But the truth will have to come out, sir, won't it?"

"Not unless someone digs it out, you know. I suppose you don't happen to know which plants he brought back from Disley, do you?"

"I could show you the plants. I wouldn't know the names of any of them."

"Would you be prepared to let me dig them up and get them identified?"

"What good would that do, sir?"

"Possibly no good at all, possibly all the good in the world. Will you chance it?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so. I'd be wrong not to, wouldn't I? Let me give you another cup of tea, and then I'll show you where he stuck them in."

When Timothy had taken up five small plants and his hostess had wrapped them in newspaper, he obtained a description of the clothes Pimm had been wearing and drove back to Trogett Hall. He hoped that Mrs. Prynne had not returned from her outing, but, if she had, he intended to bluff his way through if she challenged him. As he drove in at the lodge gates, which he found wide open, he had another idea. He got out of the car and knocked at the door of old Mrs. Hemsley's tiny dwelling. John Hemsley answered the summons.

“Oh, good, it’s you,” said Timothy. “I wonder whether you’d come along to the rock garden with me? There’s something I want to do, and I don’t want any bother from Mrs. Prynne.”

“No more do I, nor I a’nt havin’ none,” said John. “My rights be equal to hern now, I reckon, and her’ve la-di-dahed it over my gammer and me long enough. What did you want for to do, like?”

“Nothing much. Did you help with the gardening here?”

“Ah, now and again.”

“Do you know anything about rock plants?”

“Not much, and that’s a fact. Too tiddly, them little bits of nothing, for me. Give me a nice row of runner beans, and some taters, and a good, horse-dung, well-tended marrer bed—that’s more my line, if you take me.”

“I could do with somebody who could identify the rockery plants.”

“Well, squire had a book—quite a big un. Used to bring un out and lay un down on path when he was doing jobs on the rockery, like.”

“Of course!” said Timothy. “Come on, then.” He led the way to the front door, John having stayed for a moment to tell his grandmother where he was going. They went up the stairs to the library. In one of the smaller alcoves there were half-a-dozen books on rock plants and rock gardens. After a quick look at the dates of publication, Timothy selected a couple of volumes. The numbers of plants described and illustrated looked endless. After a few minutes John asked,

“Did you want to find out names of all squire’s plants, sir?”

“No, only the names of these,” said Timothy, indicating the newspaper on which he had spread out the five plants he had been given by Mrs. Pimm.

“Why for don’t you take ’em home, then, and do ’em in your own good time?”

“Yes, why don’t I? I’ll give you a line to say I’ve got these books, then.”

“No need of that, sir. I shan’t miss ’em, and neither won’t Mrs. King nor old Ma Prynne, I reckon.” He accompanied Timothy to the car and took leave of him. Timothy drove to his own home, where his man got him a meal. At just about midnight he settled down with the books and the five plants to do his homework. He slept until ten next morning, breakfasted, and then drove to Disley, managed to get sandwiches and a drink before the pubs closed, and enquired the way to the nurseries.

Apart from dwarf conifers and other such evergreens as are designed to set off and embellish gardens, the famous Frenleigh Nurseries specialised in rock plants. Timothy drove in through double gates, parked his car with several others and, having locked it, walked on a broad roadway which ended as a yard-wide stretch of crazy pavement, to the world-famous rockeries.

Intersected by narrow, winding paths, broken by waterfalls, pools, and little streams crossed by rustic bridges, stepping stones, or broad and sturdy planks, the rock gardens seemed to fill a little world. Timothy strolled and loitered, but every time he straightened up after stooping to inspect some tiny plant, he was aware that, in close proximity to him, one of the many gardeners was at work. At last he went up to one of them.

“Do you have plants for sale?”

“That’s what we’re here for.”

“Can you tell me the price of”—he waved vaguely at a bank on which ericas were in bloom—“those sort of things?”

“No, I can’t. You’ll have to ask at the office.”

"I suppose you get all sorts of enthusiasts coming here during the summer. I believe rock gardens are very popular nowadays."

"Ah, they're popular. A sight too popular, I reckon."

"How do you mean? People help themselves sometimes?"

"That's right. You can't be everywhere, and collectors are the same, no matter what their 'obby might be. No morals, none of them."

"Do you often have plants lifted off you, then?"

"Well, not to say often, but it's been known to 'appen when we've got something special that's not on the market yet, p'raps!"

"When was the last time? Do you happen to know?"

"No, I couldn't say."

"Could you put me on to anybody who would know? It's rather important. A man has been charged with a crime—a serious crime, and . . ."

"Here, come off it! What do you take me for?"

"Look, I'm serious. I'm connected with the case, and we want to check a man's alibi. If we can prove his story that he was here at the Frendleigh Nurseries pinching some of your plants at the time the offence was committed, we've got to let him go. We don't believe his story, of course, but the defence will make us disprove it."

"Trust the rozzers not to give a poor devil a chance! Hey! Ted!" An older man, working some distance away, raised his head. He was beckoned by his mate to join him. "This gent," said the first gardener, "is from the police. Wants to know whether any plants have been pinched lately."

"What plants, sir?" asked the older man, sizing up Timothy's lounge suit and smart, slightly dashing hat. Timothy produced a bit of paper.

“According to our information and an expert’s identification of the plants we think the accused man may have stolen from these gardens”—he consulted his list—“*Fritillaria recurva*, *Gentiana bavarica*, *Geranium subcaulescens*, *Iris winogradowii*, and *Ranunculus glacialis*. Do these names mean anything to you?”

“Well, they might,” said the older gardener. “I’m not saying they don’t. All the same, you’d best ask at the office. Mr. Frendleigh, he’ll be back from his lunch by now.”

“Do you remember seeing a man of about forty, five feet ten inches tall, wearing a dark grey tweed jacket, a red sweater, dark brown corduroy trousers, heavy black boots, and either wearing or carrying a motor-cyclist’s crash helmet? This would have been a week or two back on a Friday.”

Both men shook their heads after exchanging glances, and the younger one said:

“Two a penny, fellers dressed like that.”

Timothy thanked them and walked along a succession of gravel paths to the office. It was built on to a large ramshackle house and was occupied by a girl who was typing at a table in the far corner and who had her back to the door. Between her and Timothy were a massive counter with a waist-high door in it, a long table at right angles to the counter, and an enormous filing cabinet which blocked out half the end wall. There was a bell on the counter. Propped up against it was a notice *Please ring*.

The *genie* thus summoned was a thin, elderly man with an untidy moustache and leonine grey hair. He raised his eyebrows at Timothy.

“Well?” he said.

“I represent a Mr. Horace Pimm,” said Timothy. “I believe he is a customer of yours.”

“Horace Pimm? Yes, I know the name.”

"Can you tell me whether he visited your nurseries on Friday, June 23rd, at some time during the afternoon?"

"No, I can't."

"Is there anyone else who would know? It's very important."

"More important than wasting my time?"

"Far more important, Mr. Frendleigh. Horace Pimm is in the hands of the police."

"So he should be. It isn't our doing, mind you. I never prosecute these people. I understand them. There's a madness I call Collectors' Mania. So it was Mr. Pimm who got away with *Frit. recurva*, was it?"

"I'm afraid so, yes. He also seems to have taken . . ."

"Don't tell me. I know. *Gen. bavarica*, *Ger. subcaulescens*, *I. winogradowii*, and *Ran. glacialis*, eh?"

"That is exactly right."

"Oh, well, you can tell him from me that he'll never get them to grow. How did the police get on to him?"

"They think he murdered Sir Ganymede Trogett."

"Oh, is that all?" said the nurseryman, losing interest. "I thought you meant he'd been arrested for stealing my plants."

"Mr. Frendleigh," said Timothy, "this is a desperately serious matter for Mr. Pimm. *Please* tell me when—at what time of day—these plants were stolen."

"I can't. I missed them on Saturday, the 24th, first thing in the morning, but they could have been stolen at any time on the Friday, or even on the Wednesday or the Thursday, so far as I know."

"Is that *really* all the help you can give me? For instance, here we have five little plants. How did you come to miss them among all the hundreds of specimens you have here?"

“Thousands, not hundreds. I missed these because they were among the plants which are not, at present, on sale here. *Recurva* is difficult even for us to obtain. That’s why he wanted it. *Bavarica* is a beautiful thing, but difficult to grow. That’s why he wanted to show he could manage it. *Subcaulescens* and *winogradowii* are still comparatively new, and—I don’t know what other nurseries do—we are not putting them on the market yet, so, of course, a collector would want to have them. *Glacialis* is almost impossible to grow. We are still experimenting with it. I keep an eye on these specimens in particular. I have a horror of exposing difficult plants to the tender mercies of amateur gardeners, and therefore I do not sell them.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Frendleigh. So you can’t tell me whether these plants were stolen by Pimm or by somebody else, but you do know they were stolen. You missed them on Saturday, June 24th, but you can’t be sure when they were actually taken away. I am very much obliged to you, all the same.” He took a paper bag from his briefcase. “I’m afraid they’re a bit sorry for themselves,” he said, “but if they’re still any good, perhaps you’d like your plants back. I take it you’d be prepared to swear to them in a court of law?”

* * *

“Not that it matters how hard he swears to them,” said Timothy to the president of Phisbe, to whom he was giving lunch in London two days later. “He can’t provide Pimm with an alibi for the time of the murder, so what I thought of as a bit of real goose simply hasn’t come off. I can’t think what to do now. I’m convinced the poor chap is innocent, but I can’t think of any way to prove it.”

“Yes, you can.”

“How?”

“By the simple arithmetical process of subtraction. According to this nurseryman, the plants were stolen on the Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday. You have only to get the defence to show that Pimm could not have been in Surrey on the Wednesday or the Thursday, to make it obvious that the plants were taken on the Friday. Only one lot of plants was missing. These plants have been identified by the nurseryman and were found in Pimm’s garden. It seems Q.E.D. to me. He stole them on Friday.”

“Thanks,” said Timothy. “Easy when you know how, isn’t it? But that isn’t the main point, anyway.”

“Really?”

“The nursery can’t say at what time in the day the plants were taken. Pimm is O.K. until twelve noon. After that, there’s nothing but his wife’s and his own evidence to say what he did. He could have got to the nurseries by three o’clock and home again by half-past five. That would have given him plenty of time to stick a sword in Troggett at six, or thereabouts, and still get down reasonably early in the evening to the *Nesting Pheasant*.”

“Granted that Pimm did not kill Sir Ganymede, who are the people who might have done so?”

Timothy told him, adding sadly,

“But Pimm was one of the beneficiaries under Troggett’s will. That’s what will prove so unfortunate.”

“But he wasn’t the sole beneficiary, surely?”

“No, of course not. He’s been left two hundred and fifty pounds—a belated payment for the plants Sir Ganymede stole from him, I think.”

“And did he know of the bequest?”

“It doesn’t seem, I was told, that any of the legatees had known what was in the will.”

"Then, if Pimm didn't know he was to benefit, that couldn't have been his motive. I don't see what you're so worried about."

"I don't see how we're to *prove* he didn't know. Then there are the plants and the dead dog. Troggett ran over Pimm's dog some time ago. It used to go for him when he sneaked over to Pimm's rock garden to steal his plants."

"But those sort of things don't furnish a motive for murder!"

"Who's to say *what* things furnish a motive for murder? One man will kill for five bob, whereas another wouldn't do it for fifty thousand pounds. The courts know this so well that the prosecution doesn't have to prove motive, only means and opportunity."

"When does the trial come on?"

"In three weeks' time. Meanwhile Pimm is in prison. Bail is never allowed in the case of a suspected murderer. The magistrates just keep on remanding him."

"Well, cheer up. He can't be found guilty if he didn't do it, you know."

"I used to think so at one time. I'm not so sure now."

"What is the insurance company doing about your car?"

"It will be all right, I think. That's something I can do."

"What is?"

"Find out from Mrs. Prynne whether Troggett stuck that homemade bomb in it. I can't sue him now, but I'd like to know whether I had him to thank, all the same. It was more than a bit odd, his changing his mind so quickly about driving to London with me."

Before driving out to his home, Timothy rang up the *Nesting Pheasant* and booked a room for the following

night. He had spoken confidently about “finding out” from Mrs. Prynne, but the more he thought over his errand, the less certain he became that it would have any helpful results. There returned repeatedly to his mind the image of Mrs. Prynne kneeling in front of the pillar in the crypt.

He spent a comfortable night, however, at the *Nesting Pheasant*, and decided upon an early interview with the redoubtable housekeeper. He kept in mind the possibility that she might not have returned to the Hall, and stopped to enquire of old Lizzie Hemsley at the Lodge whether Mrs. Prynne was in residence. He was assured that she was. A further enquiry elicited the information that the Hall was to be put up for auction as soon as the result of Pimm’s trial was known.

“What’s that got to do with it?” asked Timothy, and was not at all surprised when Lizzie said she did not know. She ventured to ask him whether he thought that she and John would be allowed to stay on at the lodge after the house was sold, but Timothy, in his turn, was obliged to confess ignorance. That, from a financial point of view, it would be unnecessary, obviously had not occurred to her.

The front door of Troggett Hall was wide open. Timothy looked up at the staircase wall before he rang the bell. There was still the one empty space. The police were retaining the rapier which (presumably) would be put in at the trial as the murder weapon. He rang a second time before a querulous voice announced that its owner was coming as fast as he could, and Castle appeared from the kitchen.

“What’s amiss, then?” he enquired.

“Is Mrs. Prynne at home?”

“Ah.”

“Take me to her, please.”

"Her won't want to see ee. Her don't like ee, I'd have ee know."

"Maybe, but *I* want to see *her*."

"Oh, well, come you this way, then, but her won't be best pleased."

"Which room? I can find my own way."

"Lib'ry, then. You better go on up."

Mrs. Prynne had another visitor, it seemed.

Timothy, upon knocking at the library door, had it opened to him with unexpected suddenness by a young man whom he recognised as Pimm's solicitor.

"Hullo," said Timothy. "Mr. Winslade, I believe. I had hoped to contact you before this, but it didn't work out."

"You have the advantage of me, sir."

"Yes, of course. I saw you in court when your client, Mr. Pimm, was committed."

"Come in, Fish," said Mrs. Prynne. Winslade stood aside to let him pass. From a high-seated armchair, Mrs. Prynne, dressed completely in black, rose with regal decorum and advanced three steps to meet him. She held out, palm downwards, a large, thin, muscular hand. Timothy wondered whether he was expected to kiss it, so he ignored it completely, and said:

"I'm sorry to intrude on you. I did not realise you had a visitor, but since I have come some distance to see you, I trust you will spare me five minutes. It's about Horace Pimm."

"Then we are on the same errand," said Winslade. "I've come about Horace Pimm."

"But, first," Timothy went on, "I wonder whether Mrs. Prynne can help me by answering a question on another matter? A home-made bomb—a schoolboy affair, but it could have been lethal—wrecked my car after I left here while Sir Ganymede was still alive. I suspect that he put it there. I can't think why he should

do such a thing, and, in respect for his memory, I should be glad to have the matter cleared up."

"Have you brought back the silver cups you stole?" asked the housekeeper. "They will be needed when the inventory is taken."

Timothy laughed.

"I think you've seen the letter I wrote to Sir Ganymede," he said. "It was an impudent attempt at blackmail on his part which didn't come off, eh? You know where those cups are, and you know to whom you can apply for them. What about this ridiculous bomb? Trust Sir Ganymede to make a mess of things! But what had he against me, that he should attempt to blow me up? It was a bit juvenile of him, wasn't it? The only bit I can't understand is why he should also have decided to ruin his own silverware. In fact, I can't reconcile matters, so I do wish, Mrs. Prynne, that you'd elucidate them. It seems to me that you were responsible either for the bomb, or for putting the silver in my suitcase. Come on, now. I don't want to think more unkindly of Sir Ganymede than I need."

"Look here," said Winslade, "my business with Mrs. Prynne is really concluded, so I think I'll be going. I am sorry you cannot help me, Mrs. Prynne. It was, I confess, a forlorn hope. I will wish you both good day."

"Well!" said Mrs. Prynne, when the solicitor had gone. "So much for *him*! And now, Fish, to your affairs. Castle made the bomb, and I installed it. Ganymede put the cups into your suitcase. I warned him that you were not the person to submit to blackmail, but he always thought he knew best."

"So you planned to murder both of us?"

"Murder did not enter my mind."

"Then why is Sir Ganymede dead?"

"Ask the reprobate Pimm."

"You know as well as I do that Pimm had nothing to do with it."

"You are mistaken, Fish. Do you call me a liar?"

"You used the word, not I."

"Pardon me." She passed him and went to the door. In a high, screaming voice, she called for Castle. Timothy heard him running up the stairs. He must have been waiting in the hall, Timothy thought. "Castle, my veracity has been impugned. Bring weapons. I must avenge my shattered honour."

"Here! Not any more!" Castle protested. Timothy went to the doorway.

"What are you up to?" he demanded.

"Fish," said Mrs. Prynne, "you have insulted me. You must pay for your temerity. Will you fight?"

"With you? Of course not. Are you mad?" asked Timothy, reasonably. He felt perfectly certain that she was, and he did not relish the situation.

"Then do you apologise?" she demanded.

"Certainly, if you think there is anything I should apologise for."

"You take back your insinuation that I am a liar?"

"No," said Timothy, with spirit. "I'm dashed if I do! Pimm did not kill Sir Ganymede, and you know it. I have proof that he was at a nurseryman's in Surrey at the time when that murder took place. And, by the Lord Harry, I know now who murdered Sir Ganymede. It was *you!*"

"It was not murder, Mr. Herring. It was not even an execution. It was an accident, pure and simple."

"Simple, maybe; pure—I think not," said Timothy. Castle came in. He was carrying two rapiers. Mrs. Prynne took them from him, one in either hand. She proffered them by the hilt to Timothy.

"Your choice of weapon," she said. Timothy stared at her. The situation, although ludicrous, was getting

out of hand.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “If anything happens, Castle is my witness.”

“That can hardly be,” Mrs. Prynne replied. “I am married to the wretch. Unless you wish to be pinked through the guts which you do not appear to possess, you will take a sword and defend yourself.”

Timothy, with the feeling of one caught up in a nightmare from which he longs to awake, looked over to the doorway for a means of escape, but Castle was not only blocking it with his squat but significantly powerful body, he was also holding that same Commando knife which Timothy had found on his bed.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lead, Oak, or Elm

Timothy was in a ridiculous dilemma. It was so ridiculous that he was both amused and angry—a mixture of emotions which is not unknown, although it seems to be confined to the more liberally educated classes. He did realise, however, that the situation had its element of physical danger. As a swordsman he did not begin to think of himself as a match for the trained and apparently insane Mrs. Prynne. On the other hand, he could not believe that her intention was to kill him.

Leaving her holding out the two rapiers, with the hilts towards him, he swung round on Castle, poised himself like a ballet dancer and released a tremendous kick which took the shorter fellow under the chin. Castle went down and out with a thud, and the Commando knife rattled its way under a bookcase as Timothy turned round again to confront Mrs. Prynne.

“Neat,” she said, with approval, “but I’m afraid it won’t help you much.”

“You never know,” said Timothy. She was still holding out the two rapiers. “So now you are going to show me how it was done.” Not seeing any way out of the stupid and dangerous business, he took one of the swords, stepped back, and saluted her with it, suddenly remembering Sir Ganymede’s injunction not to cross swords with Mrs. Prynne—literally, it seemed.

“Your attitude, although correct, is tinged with irony, Mr. Herring,” she said. “I am not mad. Allow me to tell you a little story.”

“Nonsense!” said Timothy. “*En garde!*”

“If you will have it so.” She saluted him in turn, and the swords were engaged. He realised from the outset that he stood no chance. She was a mistress of the art of fencing. What was more, she kept up a running commentary, together with expert advice, upon his performance. The end came suddenly. She stepped close, but a little to the right, brought her left arm forward, and trapped his sword-hilt in the crook of her elbow, lowering the point of her own weapon as she did so. Then she gave a twist which almost dislocated his fingers, and, perforce, he let go of his sword.*

Timothy was in no mind to allow himself to be hurt, perhaps killed. Neither was he inclined to remember the rules of chivalry. As he relinquished his sword, he stepped sideways before she could pink him with hers, and crashed his left fist into Mrs. Prynne’s face. Then he turned tail, hurtled over the prostrate body of Castle, and tore for the stairs. He jumped the last four, almost knocking down Jane Stretton, who was at the open front door. He seized her by the arm and swung her round.

“Quick! Into my car!” he said. “I’ve committed assault and battery!”

“So that’s how you think Sir Ganymede Trogett was killed,” said Pimm’s solicitor. “It seems likely enough. I wonder whether we can bring sufficient pressure to bear on the lady to get her to admit it? It could be brought in as manslaughter, certainly not murder. With a bit of luck it might even get by as misadventure. Pity there weren’t any witnesses, because, of course, we can’t do anything about the

man Castle, if he's married to her. The first thing we'll do is to make sure of that. She may have been lying about it. The case against our client is very thin, anyway, and your evidence should be enough to get him off on a plea of reasonable doubt, if nothing more."

"There is the evidence of Mr. Frendleigh, the nurseryman bloke. Surely that will help?"

"Oh, yes, undoubtedly, although the prosecution will try to show that Pimm had enough time to commit the murder after he got back to Parsons Purity, you know. But never fear. We'll manage. In fact, in view of the trouble you've taken, I wouldn't be surprised if we can get the judge to rule that there is no case to present to the jury. Mrs. Prynne will have to be called, of course, and as she'll obviously be a hostile witness . . ."

But Mrs. Prynne did not turn out to be a hostile witness, or, indeed, any witness at all. Phisbe's surveyor arrived, confirmed Timothy's findings with regard to the state of the roof, and Timothy, calling at the vicarage with him, received two cheques, one signed by Winterbottom himself and the other signed by Mrs. Prynne. With the latter was a lengthy epistle. Having glanced at it, he decided to leave the reading of it until he got back to the *Nesting Pheasant*, where he had decided to stay until after Pimm's trial.

"Your ungentlemanly and cowardly attack on me," wrote Mrs. Prynne, "has left me with so severely bruised a countenance that I cannot confront you in public as I ought to do. You have much to answer for. This makes the second time you have struck a defenceless woman. I did not realise that Sir Ganymede had given you his own room that night. He said nothing to me about it. Well, I have had my sport with the man Pimm, a narrow-minded and miserly fellow who was none the worse off for poor Sir Ganymede's infrequent

and much-abused raids upon his rock garden, so you may tell the court that Sir Ganymede's death was brought about by me in the manner you suggested, and was not an accident. I had long been disappointed in him that he did not offer me marriage, so, as marriages are made in heaven (although Holy Writ seems vague and even contradictory upon this point) I decided to send him there, and to follow him in my own good time.

"It was Castle's idea to kill the dog, but mine to strew the plants. If the police had been masters of their art (which of course, they never are), they would have realised that the said plants, although they came originally from Pimm, had actually been dug up out of our own rock garden by me, and the beds, from which they came, carefully raked over. But, even if the police had realised this, I think it would have made no difference, since it would still have been concluded that Pimm had dug them up out of spite.

"I did, at one time, toy with the idea of implicating Elias Bagge, whose wife Sir Ganymede had run down and killed, but I decided that so old and feeble a man was unlikely to be suspected of the pinking. In any case, there was no evidence that Bagge bore any very great malice towards one who had freed him from a nagging old crow.

"I would not have killed you in our duel. I have nothing against you except your youth and pleasing appearance, and a kind of foolish chivalry you show towards the woman Jane Stretton. Do not allow her to marry you. She comes from tainted stock.

"You were right about the lead from the roof. Sir Ganymede and the Youth Club louts stole and sold it. The egregious Winterbottom guessed the truth, although he was pleased enough with his share of the proceeds. However, like all of his kind, he possesses a

needling conscience, and doubtless will make reparation.

"I regret that I descended to addressing you as Fish. It was unworthy of one who, whatever her failings, has seldom stooped to any conduct or spoken word which would deprive her, in her own eyes, of the status of lady.

"That Frimley bitch was right. Ganymede should have married me long ago. However, my wedding (for I am not, you will be relieved to know, married to the clod Castle) will take place as soon as I am fit to be seen in public. I will notify you of the exact date, as I should like you to be present to give away the bride. I hope you will not refuse me this last service. The marriage bed should be neither of oak nor elm. The former is too precious to be hidden in the cold, cold ground, even of England, and the latter too treacherous and untrustworthy a substance to contribute to an eternity of bliss. I will choose Bassanio's lead. It seems the right prelude to a marriage.

"As for the church roof, you may build it up with dead men's bones, dead men's bones, dead men's bones. Build it up with dead men's bones, my fair Herring."

The letter was not signed. As it obviously contained a threat of suicide, Timothy took it to the police, but the Inspector was sceptical.

"The woman's crazy, sir," he said. "All the same, we'll check her story about Sir Ganymede's death. If she holds to it, it will let Pimm out all right. We're not too happy about the case, anyway. I'll get along to Trogett Hall right away. Perhaps you'd care to come with me."

To return to Trogett Hall was the last thing Timothy wanted to do. He said so, and described his last visit.

"You're a bit late in the day with this information, sir," said the Inspector severely. "You should have come to us at once."

"Would you have believed me, except for this letter? It seems like a bad dream, even to me. I couldn't see you swallowing it, you know. What surprises me, as a matter of fact, is that Castle and Mrs. Prynne haven't summoned me for assault and battery, and most certainly for trespass. I had no right whatever to be inside Troggett Hall that day."

"That's as may be," said the Inspector. "I'd like you to come with me, all the same, sir. You owe me that much for holding back information which may be germane to the issue."

So, most unwillingly, Timothy allowed himself to be bundled into a police car and driven to Parsons Purity in the company of the Inspector, his sergeant, a detective-constable, and a police driver. Mrs. Prynne herself opened the door to them. Apparently she now kept it closed, in spite of the clement weather.

"Mrs. Prynne?" asked the Inspector.

"So I am ringed about by the cohorts of the damned," said Mrs. Prynne, looking balefully at Timothy. "I knew I could not trust this stinking Fish!"

"Your letter brought us here," said Timothy. "You mustn't do it, you know. You're worth a dozen of Troggett."

"A fact which does not escape me, young man," she said. "Nevertheless, it is time he made an honest woman of me."

"May we come in, madam?" the Inspector enquired, reinforcing the civil request by unceremoniously pushing past her.

"If you must, you must," she retorted. "My boudoir is on the first floor." The Inspector stood aside to allow her to show him the way. "In here," she said, pushing

open one of the doors which opened on to the gallery.
“Pray be seated.”

“This is no time for ceremony, madam,” said the Inspector. “Do you, or do you not, deny that you brought about the death of Sir Ganymede Trogett?”

“Oh, as to that,” said Mrs. Prynne, “permit me to produce a document purporting to be a certificate of marriage . . .”

“Go with her, Thompson,” said the Inspector; but the order came too late. Mrs. Prynne, having advanced majestically to the door, fled through it and down the stairs. The front door had been left open. She slammed it in the face of the pursuing detective-constable and by the time he had it open again she was across the road and running towards the south porch of the church. He tore after her, but she entered the church and he halted at the lych-gate, uncertain whether to follow her further. He was an agnostic, and, as such, deeply superstitious where the Anglican mysteries were concerned. He glanced uncertainly back in the direction of the Hall, and perceived, to his relief, that reinforcements were at hand. The Inspector, the sergeant, and Timothy came galloping up just as the organ began to boom out a tremendous setting of the *Te Deum*.

“Where is she?” shouted the Inspector.

“Inside—playing the organ, sir.”

“Not she!” said Timothy. He lifted the latch of the south door. “Quick! The tower!”

The door to the tower was wide open, but it was impossible to make any very swift progress up the winding stone stair, particularly as the rope handrail failed them halfway up, as once it had failed Timothy. A heavy crash from above their heads indicated that Mrs. Prynne had thrown down the belfry ladder. Dust was

still coming up in clouds when they gained the bell-chamber.

“Up with it!” shouted the Inspector. Timothy was interested to notice that the three policemen had bared their heads upon entering the church and still had their caps in their hands. They flung them down and began to manhandle the ladder, but before they could get it into position, the second ladder, which gave admission to the trap-door which opened on to the flat roof of the tower, also came crashing down.

“No good!” yelled Timothy. “Outside! See whether we can break her fall!”

It was a wild hope. As they skirted the west door, a black shape, spread-eagled on the unreceptive air like a gigantic bird, came swooping down to earth and found horrid sanctuary across the family vault of the Troggetts. Mrs. Prynne had kept a self-imposed tryst.

“She was too good for the likes of him,” said the newly released Pimm, when he met Timothy in the bar of the *Nesting Pheasant*. “I’m glad as the Troggetts made no bones about having her laid beside him in the family vault. She lived for him, and she died for him, and not all of us is faithful unto death, Mr. Herring.”

“She was a murderess, none the less,” said Timothy, who found this sentimental point of view distasteful. “After all, remember that she had three goes, altogether, at laying Troggett out. Well, my job here is done and done with, thank goodness.”

“You won’t stay ’til the roof is finished, sir?”

“There’s no need. To tell the truth, I shall be glad to be quit of the place. I’d like to forget all about it.”

“And Mrs. Stretton?” suggested Pimm, with his slow, innocent, malicious countryman’s smile.

“What are you going to have?” asked Timothy brusquely. “Same again? A couple of pints, Bob, please, and top them up with gin.”

"Well, thank you kindly, sir, and your very good health," said Pimm. Manciple bore down on them.

"That round of golf we promised ourselves," he said. "Will Thursday suit you?"

"On Thursday, if all goes according to plan, I shall be back in London giving my full report to Phisbe."

"Ah? Mrs. Stretton going with you, I wonder?"

"Not so that you'd notice," said Timothy. "I shall have to say goodbye to her, I suppose." He recalled, without pleasure, having his arms full of an hysterically sobbing woman who had left the church organ in the midst of a stormy recital and had come round by the west door to see, before the men could stop her, the broken body and smashed skull of Mrs. Prynne.

He called on the following morning. Trudi, with the little boy at her side, answered the door and gave him a dazzling smile.

"She is in the bedroom, not yet dressed," she said. "You will go up, no?"

"No," said Timothy. "Just tell her I called to say goodbye." He was turning away from the door when he heard her voice at the top of the stairs.

"Don't go, Tim! I'm just coming." She came as she was, in a flowered dressing-gown and with her hair loose about her shoulders. "Let's go into the drawing-room," she said, and took his arm and drew him into the house. "I suppose you're glad to be going. Are you wishing I'd never written that letter to Phisbe?"

"Are *you*?" he asked, as she released his arm and closed the door behind them.

"No. It's been nice knowing you." She laughed. "If it can be called 'knowing you,' but I don't think it can. You're a very elusive pimperl, Tim, dear. Well, let's get it over. Goodbye, and good luck. Give Phisbe my love."

“Thank you, I will. Goodbye, Jane. Be good to the kid. He can do with it.”

“Not even ‘one fond kiss and then we sever’?” she asked, still laughing. Timothy saw the tears on her lashes. He took her by the elbows, kissed her swiftly on the mouth, and fled.

* One of three methods of disarming an opponent taught by Angela, of Carlisle Street, Soho Square, in the second half of the eighteenth century.

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic

Association. Her father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.